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The Rhapsodist

Spring 2017

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
Asheville, NC

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Editor's Note:

"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive. Only if we face these open wounds in ourselves can we understand them in other people. An artist is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian. His role is to make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are. He has to tell, because nobody else can tell, what it is like to be alive."

-James Baldwin

Dear Reader,

As A-B Tech's primary venue for literature and fine art, *The Rhapsodist* showcases the best examples of creative expression from our college's diverse population. We are excited to share a journal filled with vision—some pain, heartbreak, and torment—but also, all the necessary joy, connection, and growth in between.

Thank you for your continued support of *The Rhapsodist.*

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rhapsodist, n.
Pronunciation: Brit. /'rapsəd st/ , U.S. /'ræpsədəst/
Etymology: < rhapsody n. + -ist suffix. Compare French rhapsodiste
...
1. A collector of miscellaneous literary pieces. Now hist. and rare.

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"rhapsodist." *The Oxford English Dictionary.* 3rd ed. *OED Online.* Oxford University Press, 2011. Web. 8 March 2012.

End of April
by ella mowad

Climbing up the hill on your hands and feet,
dodging graves with a book between your teeth.
You stand and strike a pose in the green heat
and I whistle with two fingers, beneath
the gnarled oak. Your voice muted from behind
Burroughs' spine: God, finally feels like spring.
I wrench the cork from our cheap white wine, blind
by the sun. You say you feel like the king
of the world up here, and laugh while you stand
with your back to the bright sky, cheeks ruddy
and knees mud caked. You step and spit your banned
book to the blanket. When you fall, honeyed
light spills all over you, pockmarked by barbed
shadows stretching from the churchyard.

She
by joanna maldonado

The Badger
by eric overbey

Last night,
the badger in my backyard snuck out of his shed.
My friend was over and she met him.
He tore the front door down and sniffed
for the whiskey that I warned her not to bring.

I told her: be gentle,
he's been dormant for months,
don't let him find the drink.

She didn't listen,
finding him fuzzy and innocent,
the bottle of bourbon gone in minutes,
all the cigarettes smoked,
the house hazy and coughing.

The liquor hit him hard,
his fur shaking,
his eyes wild
like boiling pots of water.
She grabbed him by the shoulders
and tried to hold him tight,
but he spit in her eyes
and sunk his teeth into her arm.
She tried sweet talking him
and he snarled, groped her chest,
the fabric of her shirt ripping beneath
his stained, overgrown claws.
She screamed, ran out the door;
he threw the bottle through the window
and left too.

Nothing stops the badger when he is loose.
You have to let him work it out until sunrise.

When I woke up today,
he was sprawled, slightly wheezing,
on a dusty comforter in a dark corner of the shed.
I got a headache when I saw him.

My friend won't return my calls
and the neighbors heard everything last night.
They want to tear the shed down.
They speak through the phone
in agitated mumbles:
he's out of hand;
my garden has been — ruined.

Demolition will not get rid of him.
He goes where I go.
The badger was my father's;
he built the shed to keep the little guy
in the dark as much as possible.

Murder 101
by leslie conner

Watch for her from across the street, making sure to steal glances from underneath the rim of your baseball cap. You don't want to stand out, so you wear a Red Sox one, just like your dad used to have. Wait beside the pretzel kiosk and look casual. If you buy a pretzel, it will look more authentic. As you rip open the mustard packet with your teeth and spit the hard plastic corner onto the sidewalk, smirk at all the people rushing home, trying to avoid the rain, failing miserably. Become a backdrop to the human traffic, scurrying across the pavement like roaches.

She finally steps out into the rain, wrapped in a smart wool coat, fumbling with her red umbrella, jerking the handle until it blooms out in front of her. You notice her hair, not really blonde, the loose strands worming their way out of the ponytail and dangling just under her chin. The roots sprouting from her head divide her skull in half, right down the middle. She wears lipstick two shades darker than a good girl would. You decide to call her Tiffany. Her shoes clop down the sidewalk, the heels making her calf muscles ball into little apples. Follow her shoes in rhythm, your steps in time with hers, keeping at least ten body lengths between. When the excitement makes you surge forward, remind yourself that patience is a virtue.

You know the way without looking. On the right, the boats creak and moan in the harbor, the sharp pings of ocean slapping against the hulls. On the left, the echo of your breath, your steps ricochet off the cement barrier that muffles the engines crawling down Commercial Street. You close your eyes and let the echoes guide you.

The clopping slows down, and you open your eyes. She pauses, with a slight turn of her head, sensing a ghost's breath on her shoulder. The hesitation sends shivers up your spine: equal parts exhilaration and fear of being discovered. You shorten your strides, not obviously, increasing the distance to twelve bodies.

As she climbs the front stoop of her apartment building, her keys jangle. Her hands shake, possibly from the cold, the clanking keys louder than usual. She jumps when you appear behind her and say: "Oh, you live in this building, too. I've seen you around." Laughing at herself for her fright, she smiles, not wanting to be rude.

"Yes," she says and waits with an inquisitive look before prompting, "Did you just move in?"

Her shoulders relax when you tell her, "In fact, I just moved in last week. I keep forgetting my key. It's so lucky that I ran into you, or I would have had to sleep on the stoop...again." She laughs. She believes you. "My name's Sam," you say, even though it's really Albert, and extend your hand. You've always hated the name Albert, especially in grade school. The other kids chanted Fat Albert as you carried your lunch tray to the only empty table in

the cafeteria. You hated your mother for picking that name because she loved Albert Brooks and for making you watch *Broadcast News* with her every time she was sad. She would say, "I'll meet you at the place near the thing where we went that time," every day she dropped you off at school, as her little in-joke. You never laughed.

She takes your hand and says, "I'm Geannie...with a 'G'." You smile, wondering why she feels that the spelling is important, and say "nice to meet you" as she unlocks the front door. The glass panes reflect the chaos of water dancing under the street lamps and, in the mirrored, dreamy collage of colors, you think you see wild-eyed mannequins with no arms, your face distorted, stretched putty. She lets you hold the door open for her as she glides through. You take off your cap, take one last glance at the cockroaches behind you, and follow her in.

Shake off the rain, casual, practiced charm in your movement. Make small talk. Keep her engaged as she checks her mail: Box 305. When she asks you where you live, say nonchalantly, "on the fifth floor," because neighbors separated by a floor could just as easily be strangers.

Geannie points to your cap and says, "I'm a Red Sox fan, too." Immediately regurgitate all the facts and player's names that you can remember and then quickly change the subject. Ask her what she does, and when she replies that she's an administrative assistant, try not to look at her with condescension. Tell her, "That's cool," even though now you think less of her.

She asks you what you do. Reply: "Meet beautiful women in my apartment building." When she dips her head with a humble laugh, tossing strands of hair in clumsy flirtation, notice her ring-less hand, stroking her delicate collar bone, the contours of her elongated neck, the teary gratitude that shines from her eyes. You feel the burden of being the only man who has noticed her in some time. Her face flushes. She turns away to hide her embarrassment and pushes the UP button. You smile kindly, lovingly, and think of how easy this will be.

The elevator arrives and parts its doors. You motion, like a gentleman, for the lady to board and ride the ancient elevator up to the third floor. When the bell dings, she tucks her hair behind her ear, garnished with tiny pearl studs, and steps out of the elevator. You smile at her, offer a hand, and tell her that, once again, it was so nice to meet her. She bashfully holds the door, unable to hold eye contact for more than two seconds, and asks, "Would you like to come in for a drink?"

Tell her, "I would love to."

One Way Out
by cathryn b. campbell

Life on the Inside
by abigail hickman

I was in a pretty good mood when I first walked up to the Walmart. *It's just to pick up a prescription*, I pep-talked myself as I walked toward the giant building. I sometimes get quite panicky when I approach busy places where other humans are free to behave as they see fit: a yappy dog pushed into a handbag, a long, loud slurp of coffee, an uncontained sneeze, a slap of a parental hand against a dirty-cheeked child. Every trip to Walmart reignites my religious fervor for misanthropy.

I made today's pilgrimage on a lunch break, cunningly convincing myself that I had plenty of time. *It's just to pick up a prescription*, I repeated, a simple in and out and nobody gets hurt. I had just finished the mandatory parking lot dance, eyeing the people leaving the store, visually stalking them to see if they approach a car parked in the princess parking zone near the front.

There was a woman who looked pretty no-nonsense, but she carried, among her many parcels, an infant. I didn't have that kind of time to watch her fuss with the car seat and baby bottle while I sat behind her car, knowing I had chosen a dud but not wanting to give up the position after putting in so much effort. Plus, there was something in the bounce of her ponytail that made me believe she would be *that* sort, the sort who know I am waiting and so add a few extra minutes to their exit, holding me captive simply because they can. I could tell that once she recognized her power over me, she would amble to her car, fiddle with the radio, get back out to check something in the trunk and finally, finally put her car in reverse only to press the brake suddenly to return a text message, all the while knowing that I was sitting there like a carrion bird hungry to devour the spot.

No, I didn't trust it; best to stalk somebody else. The only alternative was to park in back and I just didn't bring along enough fortitude for that experience. Coupled with the crippling heat of late fall (!), I'd have to walk past all those cars which I felt certain held a snarling dog that would lunge at the window until he shattered it, clench his frothing mouth around my tender ankle and rip at it until he dislodged it from my body, then drag it back to its car den where it would snack happily, occasionally nipping at my saucy red Mary Jane Danskin that I reserve for events that require courage. Like shopping at Walmart.

So I set up a new surveillance, and on my second sweep around, I saw a man I knew I could count on. I watched him leave the store with a bravado I envied. He wore a beard, as was the fashion of his generation, and his dark rimmed glasses were obviously cosmetic, but he walked purposefully and with intention. I followed him knowing he would be efficient once he got to his car because he was carrying a coffee maker under his arm. No bags, no bundles of tiny treasures that so many of us feel compelled to put into the cart. I could see he was a man of conviction.

He managed to walk in with one idea and stay true to his goal all the way past the giant bags of peanut M&M's (on sale for $7.00) and the knit hats tossed into a deep bin that reminded one of the best parts of bobbing for apples. It was lunch time and yet he avoided the temptation of the $5.00 pizzas lined up in the wire warmer like library books, their smell filling the aisles, beckoning the frazzled masses with their false promise of nourishment and comfort. I had once fallen for those sirens and knew their allure. But this young man was having none of it. He set his face like flint, entered the maze of persuasion and managed to eject himself from those automatic doors with just that coffee maker. I judged him as a man I could count on.

As predicted, he inserted himself into his car, swung his belt into position and glided out of the coveted spot with efficacy and a certain kind of dignity one does not find often in the asphalt-killing fields that surround these monster stores. I felt happy, just then, walking in amongst a throng of weekday shoppers. We all pulled ourselves in tightly, like a long hard drag on a cigarette, as we narrowed through the doors but then exhaled out among the aisles of possibilities once we walked past the greeter.

Her name was Susan and I thought I caught something sharp in her eye, a hardness maybe, from hours of guard duty on the front lines of the store. I felt cautious but dismissed it easily enough when I saw the party sized bags of Lay's potato chips ($4.75) standing in their puffy yellow bags begging to have their air released in a salty seduction. And so it went as I made my way to the pharmacy. Opaque stockings were on sale for $5.00--but wait, don't they always cost $5.00--the damn table lamps were still outrageously priced but the eyebrow pencils were a steal at $3.00 each.

There was a long line at the pharmacy, but one was expected to expect such things. Walmart knew this was a hot spot and even put up the amusement-park line benders that kept us all in ordered rows winding around each other until it was finally our turn. I was sufficiently inculcated to know that I must take my place at the back of line and hunch my head over my cell phone, feigning indifference and abject tolerance as the line shuffled into a bank of cashiers with all of the positions empty for one friendly-but-perhaps-a-bit-soft-in-the-brain girl whose smile was larger than the line it faced. Every once in awhile I huffed or made some other noise one does as a tepid protest against the injustice of an unnecessary wait and every now and then the action was repeated by someone else in line, a small breeze of discontent but nothing worth looking away from our rock-a-bye phone screens, not enough gust to actually wake up.

I was feeling the itchy scratch of time pressure when it was my turn to shuffle to the front of the line and meet that intrepid smile in person. I responded in kind. "Pickup for Hickman," I said happily. She was surprisingly deft with the register, holding up her hand to stop me. "Date of birth," she replied, typing all sorts of information into the computer (was she posting on Facebook or looking up my order? I suspected she was doing both concurrently) all the while holding onto that smile like a mask at a ball. I could hear a

weary resolve in her voice and suddenly respected the courage it took to hold such a smile in the face of cavernous boredom.

I dutifully gave my birth date, playfully whispering the year, acting like it was a funny a joke between us but she had been forced into such jovial complicity thousands of times before, possibly even just that morning and the thought of it wiped the smile from my own face. Her own face lost its facade at the same time as she scrunched up her eyes at her screen. I took this as a harbinger of trouble. "I don't see it here." My heart sank. I hate it when this happens.

I could feel the crowd pressing in against my back, and now it was their turn to huff in protest. *Get it together lady*, I heard in the sighs and I knew the *lady* they were judging was me. I felt my cheeks redden and I wanted a blanket to cover my ass that I felt certain was now being stared at by everyone. "My husband called it in and was told it would be ready yesterday," I said with a pinch of haughtiness like *now I've got you!* But of course, I didn't have anything, not my prescription or even my good humor. "You'll have to step down to the consultation window to get this sorted out." She smiled at the next person in line and I could feel them all shifting their attention back to their phones. *False alarm*, I heard them say mid-hunch. *I won't be inconvenienced after all.* "But I will be" I thought. I waited there a second longer, considering my options. Should I stand my ground and demand full service? This was Walmart's mistake, after all. I had followed the rules, and now I was being sanctioned for their error. But I knew before I took my first step towards the window for Misfit Toys that I would go without dissent. Maybe they will take care of me down there, I lied to myself.

It was pretty awful. The clerk appeared baffled at his job description telling me that he had just arrived. "I don't know what's going on," he said. "I just got here." He acted as if he had just been minding his own business at home, laying rat traps in his attic, when he found himself transported behind a cash register with a grim looking stranger on the other side of it."Well," I explained patiently, "Since, you *are* here, perhaps you can help me sort out this problem." I said it all sarcastically, which is a tone I generally feel too superior to use, but something about the setting made me feel raunchy and common. "I don't know what to tell you," he said in his dreamy, confused voice.
He kept blinking his eyes at me in a way I could tell had garnered him a free pass many times before in his young life. The lashes were long and just shy of feminine in their curl. Each dark line bordered a brown iris that had enough gold in it to make the viewer dig for more. I knew immediately he wasn't going to right my wrong. He blinked through my little speech where I attempted to mix exasperation with a belief in his ability to perform his job, but you can't play a player. He pointed to the row of forlorn looking chairs that bordered the burgeoning line way back in the nondescript territory between the pharmacy aisle and the grocery section. It's the place where they sell the items that defy the tidy categories of the aisles. A large pallet of firewood, for example, sat next to a flat of pumpkins and, inexplicably, a giant vat full of Chef Boyardee beef

and cheese ravioli cans. I tried to guesstimate how many cans had been piled in there there by pretending I knew a formula for volume and density. In the end, I came up with a number over one thousand but less than a million. I had plenty of time to work it out back there on the those chairs. Everybody who walked by knew I was in a Walmart time-out.

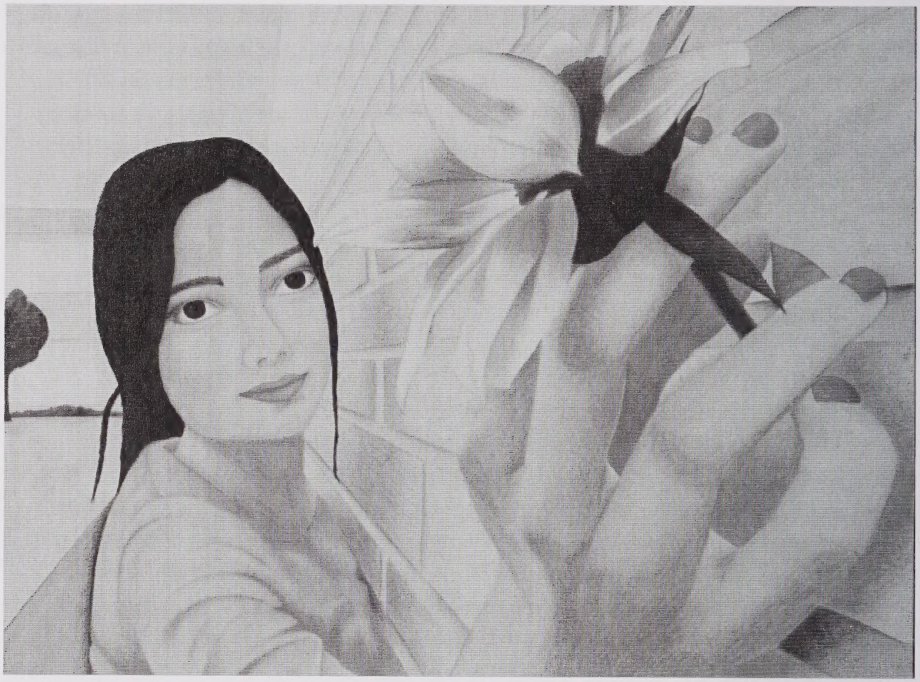
And so it went, tick-tocking closer to the argument I hold with myself in these situations. It was the kind of internal dialogue that happens at the break-up of a meaningful relationship. *Should I cut and run?* I'd ask myself. *But I had already invested so much time.* I believed we could still work it out. A lady sat down next me in one of the white plastic chairs. I felt a camaraderie and began shifting my thoughts toward an organized rebellion when the eyelash man beckoned me with a sweep of his arm. I resented him thinking that he was helping me and so, in protest, ignored him for three seconds, I didn't dare express my indignation any longer as both of us knew that he held the power. He was dangling my prescription, which I began wishing held a sedative, as I walked toward him sensing a rat holding the trap. My instincts were spot on.

I walked toward the front of the line, feeling the collective anger and resentment building within those bound without amusement in the winding line. "I've already stood in this line," I wanted to assure them. "This is just and fair." I sent them all silent messages of peace on Earth and goodwill as I fast tracked to the front. I caught a glare from a tall man in line who was so thin I almost handed him my giant bag of peanut M&M's. *Here, take these. Gird yourself for this long journey to the cash register.* I looked at him, trying to convey sympathy and the righteousness of my green-mile walk to the front, but he pursed his lips and I felt certain he was going to spit on me. They all saw me as a line jumper and within the cement walls of Walmart, line jumping was a serious felony. I felt I was seconds away from a mob attack but was saved by an unlikely heroine.

The smiling Cheshire cat clerk called "next in line" and all those judging eyes turned away from me and toward the back of the head in front of them. Her call for "next" set them back into a calibrated autopilot and they remained calm and orderly on their invisible conveyor belt as I raced up to the eyelash man. "Your prescription is ready," he said as I smiled and reached for the treasure he held. But just as my hand was about to grasp my hard earned prize, he snatched it away putting the white crisp bag inside a plastic covering with a hanger attached. He seemed to have lost that hazy, bewildered look he had the first time we met. He was now a man of action and decision. But while he now moved with the determination of an executioner, everything happened in slow motion for me: his shuffle through the rows of hanging prescriptions, the exaggerated small talk with another tech standing nearby and the final hanging of my own bag among the thousands of others belonging to the people in the line behind me. I was still staring at him, unable to accept his cruelty when he brushed me away with the power vested in him through the blue one he wore. "You can take your place in line and the cashier will ring

you up." He turned his back on me, and in a final insult I read the "How May I Help You" message printed on the back of his vest.

I'd like to think that I took my long walk of shame to the back of that line with dignity, that my eyes sparkled and the glory of my human spirit rose above the despair of that time and place. But it was not so. I fumbled with my M&M bag, finally tearing at it with my teeth and by the time I arrived to the back of the line--racing and *beating* a haggard looking woman with a cart overflowing with meaningless, plastic merchandise forever found in eternal supply within the walled mart--I munched on my M&M's staring quietly at the back of the head in front of me. "Next," I heard a voice call from a faraway land as my feet shuffled forward, accepting my place in the circle of life on the inside.



Sunflower
by ana kateri salas montano

Carmello
by ethan risinger

Carmello works
with each huff of air.

Customers like him,
he has hands they've seen before.
His coworkers know those hands
and probably don't like them.
Carmello thinks.

Each hanging shirt,
on the aluminum rack
is a woman and a man
walking behind one another.
Carmello moves them,
a man
and a woman,
kissing necks,
putting collars to lips
and pulling them
down the line.

Carmello's shirts
aren't as clean.
Whites aren't
as dutch white.
Colors,
like mirages.

Carmello thinks
the other employees,
they must not like him.
They must talk about him
behind his back.

Carmello thinks more,
but he can't hear it
over the machines.

I Write on You
by mark damon puckett

You are my body
I write on
but we need
safer ink, young
voices, brave
breath, do we
not steal
words that
are not ours?
Our mouths
are covered
when we kiss
we hardly
breathe
your spit
slides in me
I am your
body you're
written on
my skin
hurts, pens
pretending
to be smooth
as they etch
ruts in us
this is the
winter lightning
of your
electric presence
shattering
my muteness
but it's
the brightness
of everything
we are the
warm lines
white magnets
we streak
our sky

Where She Lives
by ella mowad

The old man would tell us stories about his wife in the late afternoon. I would sit with the other American boys on his living room floor, and we'd spread out on the carpet like little buddhas, sitting cross-legged with our hands over our knees. The old man sat in the middle of us and rocked back and forth in his chair while he spoke. Before beginning a story, about his wife or anything else, he would cross his fingers in his lap and fix his gaze onto the key-shaped tear in the window screen, through which the sky always looked bright like fresh paint.

Most of the time, he started out with the day he saw her first. He told us about the color of the dress she wore and went on from there, from that shade of yellow, to a description of her father's wooden boat. It rocked her away from the shore as the man stood staring from the dock, and when she stood to look at him, the wind blew a flood of black hair over her face. He said that the dress rippled close to her, and from far away, the folds mimicked those of the Greek statues. She teetered but didn't lose balance. Not then. The old man would sigh, thinking of her, and we would sigh in return and ask for another story.

So he would tell us about the pyramids in Egypt, instead. About pharaohs and ancient queens, and the desert, where dunes of gold cascaded over the land like waves. He would tell us of stone tombs and of secret passageways that led to treasure. When we asked him what kind, he said, "Rubies and emeralds, bigger than you are."

The treasure changed with each telling. The week after he said rubies, he changed his mind and said it was gold. The week after that, the treasure was a long pause and then, "Rough-cut diamonds, I suppose."

When school began back at the base, he told us that the treasure was really a library of ancient books. We groaned and scrunched up our faces, and Alan put both thumbs down in the air and made a noise like throwing up. We told the old man that we wanted gold, but he said that knowledge was more valuable, anyway, and it lasted longer if you took care of it right.

Afterwards, we started to spend our afternoons in the library when it was raining. We flipped through glossy picture books with feather light fingers, tracing over the words like they were Egyptian secrets and we were discovering them for the first time. We leaned in close to the binding and listened to the pages turn. On quiet days, we ripped them out and flew paper planes outside in the muck, watching them hover and then go down in the rain, landing on the concrete in soggy, Technicolor chunks.

The old man passed her portrait around to us, once. She even looked like a ghost in the photograph, dressed in white and framed by ornamented silver. The edges of her were blurred, as if they were fading away. I didn't think that she looked like Athena. I didn't think that she even looked Greek.

I started to imagine her suspended behind the old man's chair, with her white dress branched out from her body like the tendrils of a jellyfish.

We looked at the portrait as long as we had to, and waited for the man to place it back on the coffee table before we shot our hands up and asked for a story. When we did, he told us about the Aztecs. He told us stories of temples deep in the green heart of the jungle, where people wore gold bars around their necks and sacrificed women to the sun and

sky. We asked what it meant, to be sacrificed, and he lied and said he couldn't explain it in English. Instead, he told us that they used to play ball barefoot in the grass like we did, and that the losers walked home without their clothes.

Afterwards, we ran out of the house and played ball like the Aztecs. We ran under the sprinklers and skidded hard into our front lawns, coming up for air with dirt caked above our eyelids and the remains of our mother's bluebells between our teeth. The losers walked home with their white shirts hung over their shoulders like flags of surrender.

A week later, he showed us another photograph. It was worn at the edges and the paper was coming undone in fibers. In it, she was sitting on a wide rock by the sea, wearing a dark suit and leaning back on her elbows. The grey sun was right above her, and her eyelashes cast long shadows over her cheeks like the thin, black spines of urchins. The photograph had been folded and unfolded in the middle, and a fuzzy white line ran across her abdomen like a crack in cement.

I sometimes imagined her behind the old man in her swimsuit, instead of the dress. The mackerel-patterned wallpaper of the living room showed through the open line of her stomach.

When Alan's mother gave him a goldfish for his birthday, we brought it to the old man's house and he told us about Atlantis. Sunlight shown through the window and into the bowl, lighting the fish up like an orange christmas light. We looked at its fins and the tiny ridges going up its back, and I tried to count them while the old man told us about the drowned Greeks. About marble columns and statues at the bottom of the ocean, and frescoes of olive groves and Greek gods hidden from the light.

Alan asked, "Our ocean?"

"Yes, I think so," the old man replied.

Then Alan asked, with the fishbowl glowing tangerine between his hands: Is that where she is?

And the old man replied, because we were young: Yes, I think so.

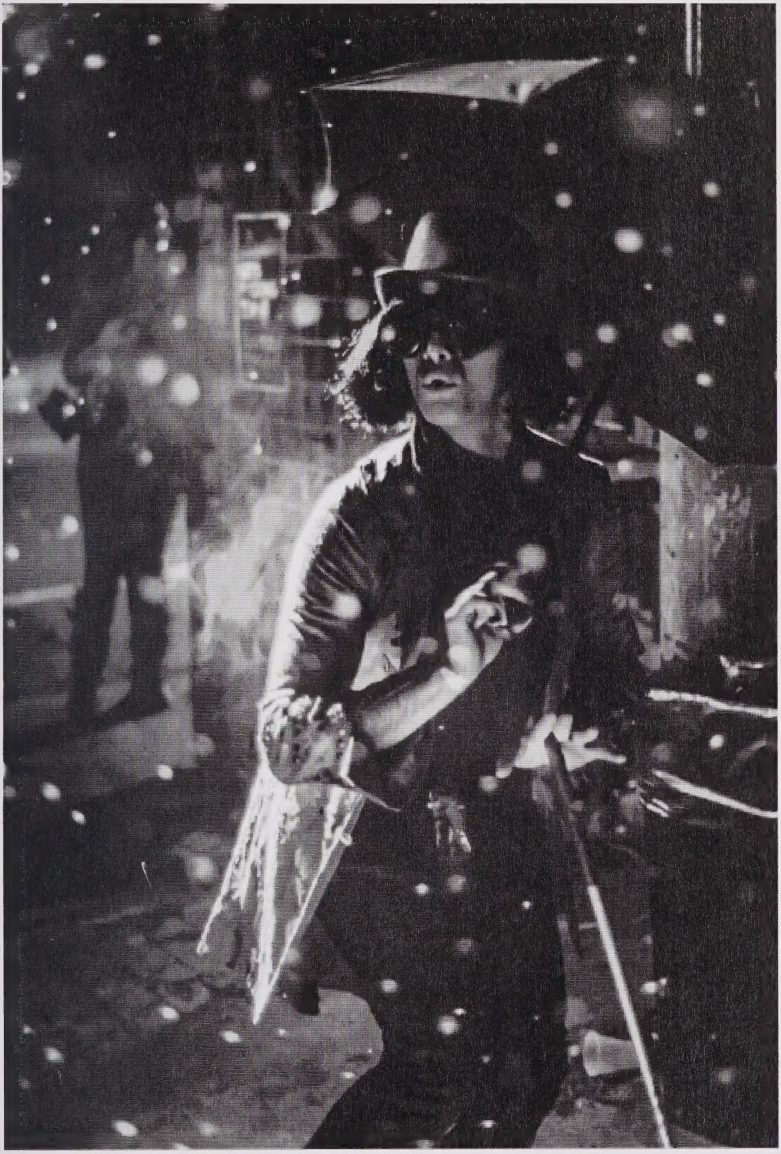
His wife smiled from behind him, her teeth like the insides of smooth, white shells.

We walked to the beach that afternoon to look for urchins under the dock. I sat with my feet over the water while the other boys dove and came up with the black animals in their hands. I held out a jar to put them in, and we watched them magnetized through the glass. Their spines moved slowly in circles, as if they were rotating individual gears from the inside.

A few jellyfish made it into the jar, too, having been brought in Alan's outstretched palms. They were boxy and harmless, and their borders ran with color like a spectrum from an oil slick. Some of them came torn apart by rudders, but still alive and pulsing in pieces. I didn't swim that day.

When the sun went down, we stood on the edge of the dock with our toes hanging off. I stood between the other boys' rubbery shoulders and looked under the surface, thinking that the old man's wife might rise up from the water as if out of a bath, gasping and tired of holding her breath. I wondered if she would be soaked in the yellow dress or the white, or if she had gone under the sea in her suit.

The wind blew all around us, coating our hair and skin in salt. It was past curfew, but we kept looking, pointing at the water and trying to scare each other by saying that we saw her, right there, just under the wave.



Asheville Gets Weird
by traci thompson

Bad Blood
by maggie shoup

I am barefoot on the altar with zinnias
no veil, but unseeing
breasts already swollen
by your first child, your first gift of blood.

Later, what will swell?
A bloom crushed into the fat of my motherly arm,
purples spreading like the laden sky
that loosed a torrent
softly, into my wedding dress
like you mouth, love
like your fist,
falling as darkly as the bitter marks
of your bad blood.

I will ask you to leave. Again. I will
ask you to stay. In between, you will gift secret purple jewels around my wrist.

Dead daytime drunk,
kicking a suitcase crammed with dissatisfaction,
claiming the flu, you will fall.
You will wake
left side slack, foot dragging
an eye, stray, lobbing upward like a lost balloon.

Your eyes are blue-gray, like a snug Sunday vintage suit.
Your eyes are blood red.
Your eyes roll backward and you smile.
They are time travellers. They visit a joy I cannot see.

You are wiggling on a blue plastic gurney
as if the click of wheels
is the ascent of a very tall roller coaster.
The doctor holds, in two stiff fingers
quarantined far from his taut lips
a snapshot of your cerebellum, soft and rounded
studded with tiny gray berries of lesions
and fat black lakes of bleeds
the remaining slip of your pons
a corseted ballerina
alone in a dark sea of blood.

I will take you home. You will die at least once.

Turkeys will amble past cooling trees hung orange with bittersweet,
brown tails rustling the damp stalks of fading zinnias
while I throw you down on the hardwood
where I once squatted
and pulled our son's waxy head from rice paper cervix
while midwives worked their butter soft balls of yarn.

The glug glug of your jugular will slow beneath my forefinger
not fading as I would have imagined, but choked
like an unventilated gas can gasping for air. Your shoulders
will bang against the dark dark oak, chest bouncing between breaths.

Later, what will swell? A bloom crushed into the white of your sloping cerebellum,
purples spreading like the laden sky
that loosed a torrent
as I pressed my mouth
to your slack mouth, love
waking you darkly
from the bitter sleep
of your bad blood.

Occultation
by rita dee peters

Ultimately, a Dream
by eric overbey

I woke up on a cloud and Jesus was there too,
he smiled at me and said, *the moment has come, it's time for part two.*
I said, *oh, shit, I'm going to heaven?*
and he said, *no, man, the rapture is approaching, you better join the zoo.*

The sky was dark and moonless;
the cloud landed somewhere downtown,
the doors of the bars banging open and closed like irritated eyelids,
businessmen twirling in circles with socks on their heads.
I asked Jesus what was happening and he put his sunglasses on
and said, *my man, you've slept awhile, don't touch anything with your left hand.*

A rockstar approached, his fingernails smashed;
he handed me a picture of himself, saying he really needed the cash.
I told him I lost my wallet and me and Jesus dashed,
but Byron blocked us off with his delicate pony
and said, *if you dare, admire the pink curlers in my hair.*
I told him what a shame Keats is still dead and he yelled *giddy-up*
at his gold-maned mare.

Jesus led me to a theatre and we sat down with others, listening
to old men in polo shirts speak about the tragedy of voting booth covers.
I had a bag of popcorn and Jesus had a beer;
the old-timers warned of death and pointed at the ceiling with fear.
Jesus whispered, *don't trust these guys, I've got a bad feeling,*
and, in the row behind us, a girl sipped from her cough syrup straw
and said, *me too, these men are just a'reeling.*

We bailed midway through the show,
and stumbled upon an old-fashioned political row.
The streets were packed with people from stop sign to stop sign.
One side wore shirts that read 'Consider the Soon,'
the other side took out their helium tanks and filled balloons.
Journalists kneeled on the sidewalks,
having no plans to put down their cameras and talk.
Jesus said, *we better pick a side, these people look ready to go.*
I looked down the alley and saw Malcolm X cleaning his glasses quickly.
News of his return echoed through the crowd
and Jesus said, *I can't believe this guy thinks he still has sound.*
Malcolm squinted through his round rims at protest signs,
shaking his head at all the jagged, green lines.
The city smog was rich and his eyes were dim.

Beneath the streetlights were bomb shelter men, cracking open peanut shells
and thanking God for the delicious taste of sin.
I heard a soft giggle and the city shaman, in his backwards hat,
skipped by reading the latest issue of Milkman Smut.
Malcolm patted Jesus on the back and said *good luck,*
then he tossed his glasses in a wastebasket
and crawled swiftly back inside his casket.

The noise was too loud
so me and Jesus ran and found a way through
to a park with room for two.
A mailman stopped us and barked, *package for a Jew.*
Jesus lowered his sunglasses and said, *it must be for you.*
I tore through the package and just about died.
It was a pair of furry handcuffs and a ruler that was thick and wide.
Jesus grinned and said, *I don't judge, we've all got a kinky side.*

I was rocking on the swings when Jesus began to sing this torturous bland thing.
I threw a rock at him and said *will you shut up? I'm waiting for my phone to ring.*
His mouth squeezed shut. I could tell he was serious.
He pulled out a book and his beckoning hand was imperious.
He licked his finger and searched for the ideal dilemma,
then, before his angelic glow was fulfilled,
he tossed the book aside, and said *I'm just messing with ya.*

The silence was too quiet
so we left the park and noticed posters saying, 'Elections Tomorrow.'
Jesus grabbed me by the shoulders and said, *this is our chance,*
and as we sprinted toward the tuxedo shop,
I couldn't help but think I would have to stuff the ballot box.
But Jesus had this focused look in his eye and that's all a mayor really needs;
that and a magic packet of grass-root seeds.

We stood on stage, waiting for the votes to be counted.
Jesus, hair slicked back. Me, behind him, arms crossed,
like any good assistant with a passionate boss. But something was wrong.
The atmosphere was sauced, the speakers
playing a filthy theme song, deacons pacing the walkways,
selling programs and shiny containers of lip gloss.
For a minute I thought Jesus was gonna cry,
but he just undid his tie
and told me he had to head back soon.
I said, Jesus, *you can't quit, what would your dad think?*
But his shoulder pads had already sunk.
He unbuttoned his shirt and untucked the front,

heading toward the concession stand
where they traded hot dogs for recyclable cans.
I accidentally grabbed a hot dog with my left hand
and my arm, like the life of an hourglass, turned to sand.
Jesus went into a great fit.
He slapped me across the face and told me this is it.
The black sky was ripped by a chasm that split with flaming red ferocity,
lightning frequently striking like electric rain,
the wind rolling in white waves that singed anything it touched.

I woke up in bed
and grabbed my throbbing head.
I ambled to the bathroom and mumbled,
Good God, am I glad that dream is dead.

2017 Poster Contest Winner
by laurel plyler

Letters From Mount Mitchell
by chelsea nicole ensley

September 19th 1910

Dear Mamma,

Preacher Bo told me I was going to die. He just stood up there and said those words plain as day: "You all is going to die someday." My heart fell down into my belly, and I felt a fluttering inside like a million butterflies being let loose from tiny cages. And my hands, they got slick and left a perfect ring of damp on my favorite white dress. Now I don't know much about death, but I do know that I'm probably not going to die. I remember reading in the Bible that God is gentle and lowly in heart. We thought hard on God's words and rolled them over and over in our minds, sitting on that old rainbow colored blanket you patched together last winter. Those words is a part of me now, so I am sure that Jesus would never kill His people. Preacher Bo said I was His people. Mamma, I can't die because I don't understand death, and nobody is going to do something they don't understand. I hope you don't understand death either. If you did, I just might too.

Love, Klessa

September 25th 1910

Dear Mamma,

I went to the top of Mount Mitchell today. Lately, people have been nosing around, men and women in dark clothes and fancy hats. These people usually make their way up from Black Mountain. Some of the town's people put their heads together and cut out a trail for these strangers to travel on. Daddy had a fit over this, but there was really nothing he could do. You see, these strangers are paying the folks down in town to lead them up the mountain. Daddy said lots of folks have never seen mountains like ours, and they sure haven't been up as high. I don't really blame all them people for wanting to come up here, but I hate to see Daddy all strung up about it. But that's how he's living these days, all tied up in his own mind.

At the very top of the mountain where the wind hits me the hardest, I can see down into Black Mountain. I feel like I'm protecting Daddy in some way when I'm looking down on him while he's working and living out his days in the valley. I still ask him if I can go into town with him, but he says I need to stay home and keep an eye on you. He says my job here is important, and he'd never trust anybody else to stay with you. When Daddy tells me this he doesn't smile and push my hair behind my ear like he's proud. Instead, he just steps back to see all of me. He looks me up and down then turns away. I know he needs me, so I'd never make much of a fuss about staying behind. Besides, I

like it up here. It's quiet, and the loneliness has begun to fade.

While I'm watching the birds, I remember Jesus telling His disciples to watch the fowls of the air. To understand how they get by, simply, not worrying at all, just resting on a branch or a bundle of grass waiting on God. I wish I could wait on God, too. Instead, I spend my days watching you and waiting for the worst to happen. But I believe you're trying, Mamma. When that shaking comes over you, I know that's you trying. But I'm afraid of what you would become without that nasty brown liquid. It was almost a year ago that I tried it for myself. After I took a sip, after the smell cleared out my nose, and the taste hollowed out my throat, I only felt more confused about why you would choose this way to exist in the world. Don't be mad at me. I just wanted to understand what you were doing. I remember because it was the day after my thirteenth birthday. You didn't come out of your room to play along in Daddy's celebration. He spent the early morning making biscuits and strawberry jam. My favorite. While the biscuits were rising, I watched Daddy slip into your room and soon heard his whispers pleading with you to come out, but you never did. Daddy and I ate alone that day. He smiled at me from across the table as crumbs fell from his mouth. I just stared at him. I couldn't bring myself to pretend. Not on my day.

With your secrets settled down inside of me, I can't help but wish I was like them birds, just like the one I saw today. He was a deep blue with a stripe of coal black racing down his breast. I wanted to scoop him up and bring him home to you, but that would have just ruined his life, ruined everything Jesus said.

Love, Klessa

September 26th 1910

Dear Mamma,

A flood of birds came out from under the porch this morning when I opened the door. I like to think they followed me home and was waiting for me to come outside, so they could free themselves. You should have heard them, Mamma. I imagine their escape sounded like an ocean wave. A roaring sound so loud it seemed gentle. Overcome— that's what Daddy calls it. He says that word when tears fall from his eyes or after a long day's work.

"I am overcome too, Daddy," I say to him. He laughs, brushes my cheek with his thumb and goes off to the back bedroom tending to you. I stand there still overcome, thinking about them birds, roaring. I want to see what they're doing under the porch, but I'm too afraid to look. I wish you'd come with me. We would look together, fearless. Maybe we'd discover a billion nests dotted with bright blue eggs. I'd reach out to steal one, and you would stop me by pulling at my arm. Stepping away, I'd still want one to take home to keep warm in my sock drawer and wait for it to crack open, so I could see the life inside. I know you want nothing more than to come with me, but if I asked you'd still

say "No." I can imagine the wetness puddling in your eyes. So, I sit here on my favorite rocker and only think about all them birds. How they're like shadows, swallowing everything in black for a moment then flying up to the sky. People are like shadows; they cover and swallow me then they're gone.

Love, Klessa

September 30th 1910

Dear Mamma,

I don't really remember Baby Ray like you do. I only seen him for a second then he was gone. Daddy had him wrapped in a brown cloth. He looked so small in Daddy's arms. I remember Daddy leaning down to let me see him. His nose pointed out like mine, and his skin looked dry and flaky. Past all that, he was blue. I knew then he was dead. I inhaled deeply then backed away from Daddy.

Daddy watched me move away from him. He stared at me for a moment then said, "I don't want you to worry about this, Klessa. Ray's already in heaven with Jesus, and that's the best place to be ain't it?"

I just looked up at Daddy and nodded. He took Ray back to the bedroom where you were, and you two stayed in there past suppertime.

I didn't understand how Ray could be dead already. It didn't seem fair to me. It didn't seem like God would do something like that. Maybe Preacher Bo was right. He was always telling me I was going to die. I hated him even more every time he said that. I was sure God didn't like him either, but maybe I was wrong. Remember when we was down in town, and we seen him kill all them baby mice? During the church service, Preacher Bo stood, as usual, at his tall wooden pulpit.

"I have some bad news," he bellowed from his fat wet lips. "The church is infested by mice. Or as I like to call them, little devils."

I reached over and grabbed your arm. You looked down at me and whispered, "They're not real devils, Klessa, only mice. They're harmless. Small little fellas. They could fit in your hand." I smiled up at you. You always knew exactly what to say. Back then, you knew how to comfort me in the midst of the horrible.

"Before we begin the service today," Preacher Bo continued. "I'd like us to bow our heads and pray for the church to be rid of these intruders." He pulled at his long black beard as he spoke. I never bowed my head when he told us. I just watched him. I saw how he fiddled with the dry hairs that fell from his face and how he pulled up the tops of his baggy pants around his stained wrinkly shirt.

Later that day, while you was talking to your friends outside Daddy's shop, we seen Preacher Bo on the church house steps smashing those little gray puff balls, one at a time, with his Bible. His shirt was unbuttoned, and he kept wiping his forehead with the back of his chubby hand. One mouse kept

running around him, weaving in and out between his legs and over his worn out black leather shoes, almost taunting him.

"Get back here you little devil," he screamed. "I'll teach you and your little friends to never come in God's house again!" I couldn't bear to watch, but I couldn't pull my eyes away.

"Mamma!" I screamed up at you. "Look what he's doing. Look!" I started to make my way over to Preacher Bo.

You tugged hard on my arm. "Klessa, where do you think you're going? That is none of your concern."

"But Mamma, look!" I pointed over to the church. Preacher Bo had finally caught hold of the mouse's tail. He threw his Bible down on him with both hands then slammed his foot on the Bible's cracked leather. I watched him kick the Bible away and stare down at the mouse. The flattened gray ball twitched for a moment then lay still. Preacher Bo picked up his Bible then walked back inside the church, and that dead mouse just laid there. Alone.

"This is just the way things are. It's none of our business. Do you understand?" you said as we made our way over to Daddy who was leaned up against our wagon across the street.

"No. I don't understand," I mumbled as I climbed up the wagon's broken wooden steps. There was only room for two, but somehow you, Daddy, and I always fit. It was like we fit perfectly into each other. Like we was all part of each other somehow.

"What's all this about?" Daddy asked as he settled beside me. I turned to look up at him then buried my face into his chest. I could never stand to look at Daddy when my insides was all torn open. He could always see right through to my heart, and he didn't mind to sit there with me and feel what I was feeling. I felt strong every time I buried myself in Daddy. In him, I believed I could be anything. But apart from him, I felt like nothing at all.

"It's okay, Klessa," he whispered. Then he made a tick tick sound with his mouth, and our mule, Buckeye, took off toward home.

As we made our way up to the house, I made the decision to never believe anymore of the truths Preacher Bo flung out from his pulpit. How could he call himself a disciple when he went around killing what God made? Everybody else could believe him, but I would know better.

I hated how Preacher Bo was right this time. How he was right about dying, about Ray. I know you loved Ray, Mamma. I remember you telling me I was going to have a brother or sister. Ray or Rebecca. Them was the names you decided on. You didn't really care what me and Daddy thought. This was your baby. You told everyone in town about it. When you told them you pulled your hands up to your belly and cupped that little bump where Ray was tucked away inside you. I wish I could remember being close to you like that. Knowing you was alive at every moment of every day. Living by your heart beat.

Daddy buried Ray's little body out in the woods away from the house. Daddy said that was the best place. I don't think you ever went to visit him. I think you just held onto him in your mind. His soft kicks inside you and his

hands pushing across the lining of your belly. Maybe all your plans for his life played out over and over in your mind. Maybe you imagined him living somewhere beyond this mountain, creating a bigger life than these hills allowed.

We buried Ray that same day. The day he was born. You didn't want anyone else to come. Daddy begged, but you said "No." I think you was a little ashamed. Ashamed of holding and smiling down at your belly as you wobbled around town. Ashamed of telling your friends the names you had finally decided on. Ashamed of letting me and Daddy talk to your belly, talk to Ray like he was really there.

No one was invited to the burial. It was just us. We stood among the thick balsams and watched Daddy dig a faint hole in the hard earth. No one cried. We just looked. You brought your Bible with you, and you clung to it as we watched Daddy. I remember you refused to hold Ray once we left the house, so Daddy sat him gently on the ground while he dug up the dirt for his grave. Ray was bundled in my thin and tattered baby blanket. That morning, as you laid there with Ray on your chest, you asked Daddy to go get the blanket from the bottom of my bed.

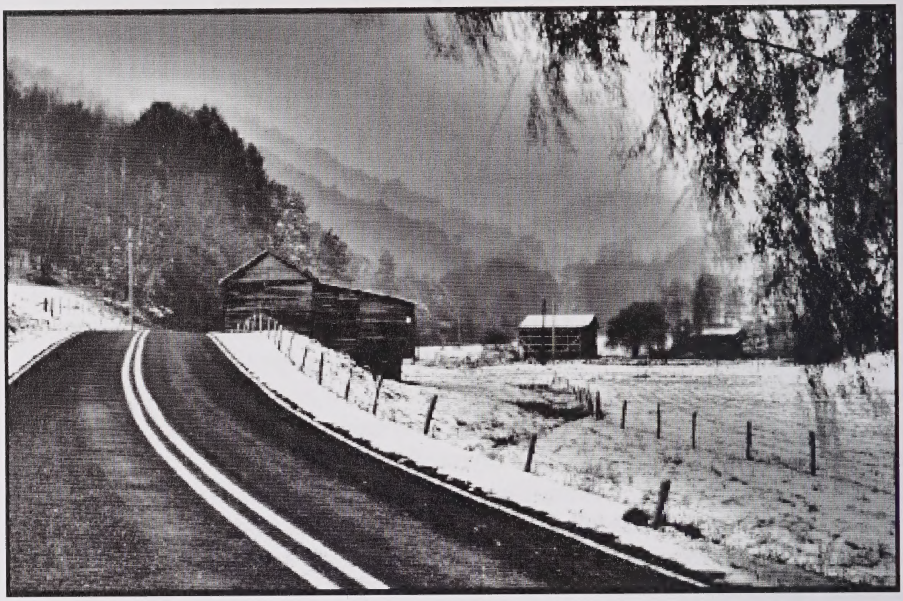
"I think it's important he have this," you said to me. Like always, I nodded like I understood, so I could comfort you. But I knew Ray didn't need what was mine. He didn't need anything. Everything was already taken from him.

After the burial, you didn't go down to town and sit with Daddy in his shop anymore. You didn't tend to your garden. You didn't come out of the back bedroom. That's when I started to hate Ray. I couldn't believe what he'd done.

One night, I went out into the forest to that little hump in the ground where Ray rested. As I made my way up the mountain, the wind came quicker. Each gust began to feel like a lash to my face. When I finally reached him, I let my hand brush over the hard cracked dirt and go down into the ground. I felt him there, his tiny body wrapped in the soft cloth. I pulled him up out of the earth. His face was caked with red dirt. I remember Daddy didn't even bother to put him in a box. I think he just wanted him out of the house. Out of our lives.

When I pulled him up, I unwrapped him from my blanket and drew his face to my chest. I stayed there squeezing him and listened to the trees lean into each other with a deep wheezing. Warm tears started to circle down the side of my face. I didn't cry because I wanted Ray to come back to life. I cried because he died. I cried because he hurt you and took everything from me. I cried because he made you love him. He made you believe in death. I pulled my blanket off of Ray and sat him back down into the hole and pushed hard crumbles of dirt back over him with my hands. Once he was hidden beneath the earth, I stood and turned away, my blanket flapping against my closed fist.

Klessa



Winter
by traci thompson

Black Princess
by melanie yvonne white

Beautiful black lips,
beautiful curves natural born brick house
tattoos all over your body telling stories of your history.
I love your beautiful black body
naked lying beside me.

I rub my hands on your
beautiful black face,
your beautiful face not a wrinkle,
not a bump not a thing is out of place.
Oh how God

was so perfect when he made you.
The perfect black woman,
Flawless is your name,
beautiful is too simple, radiant is too plain.
You're beautiful black skin

with beautiful black breast,
with beautiful black nipples,
that I cup to hold to the light.
The moon is shining so bright
we both want to admire you.
I'm glad he came out

so I can see just how beautiful you are to me.
I run my hands down your spine
word of God's delight fill my mind
oh how God is so good,
when I say all the time,
all the time,
my beautiful black princess,
oh how glad
oh how glad

Walter
by ethan risinger

Walter might be a good kid.
Walter likes tricycles
more than bicycles,
or at least he is pretty sure.

There are hundreds of frogs
in Walter's World.
Moving over and under him
over and under each other.
Rubber legs firing across his eyes
like rubber band shooters,
like he's watching war.

Walter stepped on one once.
He didn't mean to,
but the noise was nice.

Walter has no clue
how long he's been
popping frogs;
time doesn't really matter
with pretty things.

Walter's dad might be a bad person.
Walter's dad likes gulping
more than sipping,
but he likes to smile too.

"Walter? What are you doing?"
"I'm poppin' frogs.
It makes 'em happy!"
"Walter, son,
We can't-
We can't hurt things."

Walter's feet felt dangerous,
like they
should screw off his body.

Walter didn't know who he was.
Walter started to wonder
how he had a name.
Battles
seemed like different things now.

Walter's dad
only knew how to hug,
not how to talk,
but he carved into Walter's ear
with his breath,
"We can't hurt things,
We can't hurt things."

Fibonacci
by markia c.t. brooks

A heavy coat is losing feathers
sitting hard on a carved bench
Morningside Park at its back
while Columbia blots out the Sun
It looks sort of fat
swollen like what them boys wear
but, little feathers are flaking away
they pop out kind of puffy
floating down in a spiral
some caught in the wind
spinning, spinning, spinning.

Habitat for Humans
by cathryn b. campbell

They Call Home the Jasmine Trees by the Water
by sara corpening-zenz

It is cold on the aeroplane, and the controls to adjust the air are forbidden ground, but the flight attendants are crisply aloof, gliding by in their pristine uniforms, remote and glacial. Their movements are clipped with firm precision: pointing to the exits, explaining emergency procedures, detailing the path of the flight.

The desert will be hot, all empty sand and sky, and I did not think to bring a blanket or jacket. It's been over twenty years since I have seen Jordan as anything more than an image on a postcard or travel website, both a foreign country and a different life.

"Vacation next week." My boss is peering over his wire-rimmed glasses with red-rimmed eyes.

"Yes, yes sir."

"The twentieth until the twenty-eighth." He presses his fingers together into a mountain, then spreads them against his chin. "Unpaid leave, of course."

"Naturally, sir."

"Well, I suppose I can allow you to take vacation early. Have any plans as to what you'll be doing? Visiting the city, friends, family?" His voice is jovial, now, face open and friendly. The transaction done, he's shed his businessman's skin and put on that of a stout, balding man in his late fifties.
I bob my head in response, hands clasped respectfully, shoulders down. "I'm going to Jordan – "

"To – Jordan?"

"Yes, sir, – my mother is dead."

Layla is the one to call. At the time the only thing I can think is how much extra the phone company will charge me for a call all the way from Jordan. She was crying, which is how I know something is terribly wrong, and a cold metal fist twists itself in my stomach – Layla never cries.

"*Yalla, yalla, ya Jamal, habibi*," she said, words choked and tight, "it's our mother; she is dead."

It's been years since I allowed myself to speak Arabic, much less think in the language, much less communicate in *shaami*, the Jordanian dialect of home. What little Arabic I have spoken has been *fusha*, the formal dialect, and little pieces of separation start slowly falling into place as I make my way from the airport to my aunt's house: the dropped letter *qaf*, how the *tha* becomes *ta*, the *ta marbuta*'s change from *ah* to *eh*.

A child runs by – feet bare, jacket flying – and yells, "*Kalbi!*"

Kalbi, my dog. Slowly, I trace out the letters on my palm: *kaaf-aleph-la- ba*, kalb, dog. *Kalb, kalbi, al-kalb*: the words even taste foreign, something made from unfamiliar elements, heavy on my tongue.

Jeem-mim-aleph-lam: the letters that make up my name, Jamal. *Handsome*. I can picture my mother whispering my name, if I keep my eyes tightly shut: *ya Jamal, bahibak, ya Jamal*.

Layla greets me in my aunt's house. "*Mar haba, habibi, ahlan wa-sahlan, keefik*," she cries, kissing me on the cheek with the familiarity of blood relations, then slips into accented English: "How are you, ya Jamal, what's the news? I'm glad to have you here, *Baba-na*, our father, wanted to be here but he couldn't leave work." Work, for our father, is in Egypt.

The other relatives are gathered in the kitchen drinking coffee: Farha, my aunt, and her husband; Zaynab and her sisters, all dressed in colourful clothes; Abdul and his new wife, Sara, shy and veiled and clinging to his arm.

"The funeral is tomorrow," says Farha, embracing me – the flight was long; surely I am thirsty; is there anything she can do for me?

"Tell us about your work, ya Jamal. How is journalism?"

Journalism is well, even if I am not: I explain slowly the bustle and confusion of America, feeling childlike again, but even they – little Raya, Jack, and Hala – speak rapidly, dropping the *qaf* and substituting *ta* for *tha*.

The funeral is a quiet affair, with Farha and Layla crying quietly into each other's shoulders, and the husbands standing stiffly off to the side. My mother's body is veiled, but I am still permitted to hover by the table, to drop an imaginary kiss upon her covered forehead, to whisper "*Bahibik, ohmi*," into the thick, heavy silence of the room. Afterwards the women go home, and the men go out to a small café, to eat and to smoke. It's water pipe, much different from what I'm used to, but Abdul takes out a pack of cigarettes: Marlboros, the label in Arabic, a piece of America and Jordan both.

Jordan is more than a different country to me; it is a different world. I don't look out of place here, but I feel it, a sharp ache in my chest every time I pause to ask the word for car or book or bed: "*As-sayyara, al-kitaab, bi-nam*," Layla whispers, her hand on my arm, for once sisterly in her tutorship.

The children are Farha's, and they speak as much English as I speak Arabic. We communicate in gestures and looks; they're expressive, making faces when I try to help them with their homework, and laughing delightedly when I show them trinkets like my Swiss Army knife. Jack tries to take it apart, can't put it together again, and is crestfallen. "*T'sharrafna*," I try, offering the knife, and his face is like the sun when he takes the tool and puts it in his own pocket.

Layla and Farha and Zaynab bustle about in the kitchen for most of the day, cooking and arguing; Zaynab's coffee is the best, but Farha holds firm that it tastes awful. "*Ahweh!*" she spits out, disdainful, stabbing at the cups with one manicured fingertip. "The coffee, it's bitter."

"*Ya Jamal*," Abdul calls, from the living room, where he and the other men are watching TV and grumbling about the dry weather, and I go, shading my eyes against the sudden burst of light from the television set that's almost as ancient as the desert itself. Layla smiles at me as I pass by the kitchen, a sudden bright flash of teeth, and then turns back to the dinner she's cooking.

Wild Heart
by kaitlyn g. young

El Poeta
by isabel perez-solis

Es la belleza de tus palabras
Que endulza el paladar de mi oído,
Y es que en ti encuentro la calma
Cuando acaricias mis manos
Sin el rozar de tu piel.
Es la melodía de tu vos,
Que me desvela en los sueños
Y que me causa un destello
Dentro, de mi corazón.
Es tu hermosura genial
Que me desnuda completa,
Y después me penetra con su mirada inusual.
Y es que tus ojos tan finos,
Y tu poesía elegante,
Que le dan vida al sonido
Y a mí me hacen volar.

The Poet
by isabel perez-solis

It is the beauty of your words
that sweetens the taste of my ear,
and it is in you that I find the calm
when you caress my hands
without the touch of your skin.
It is the melody of your voice,
that lightning strikes me in dreams
and allows me a glimpse
inside of my heart.
Your beauty strips
me naked,
and then penetrates me with its look unusual.
And those are your eyes so fine,
and your poetry elegant,
that give life to the sound,
and I fly.

'91-'16
by amie estes

I know we weren't all that close
But it's still a little odd seeing you around
When I know you died in Florida
Over half a year ago.
I think we thought you'd be safer
So we sent you away
Sent you home
Hoped for the best.
We didn't expect them to follow you, not so far south -
Out of the mountains
Across state lines
All the way to your mother's house
Up the stairs, to your childhood bedroom
Where they found your brother
The year before.
Out of the corner of my eye
I still see you everywhere I used to -
Still sitting on the stairs behind the parking deck
Or buying your Parliaments
Or standing on your skateboard, cigarette in hand.
Just the little things
Nothing in the grand scheme
And you know, I'm really not sure
If we're ever anything more -
Just a smoke on the stairs
A drink at the end of the night
A wave through the glass.

Hotel Room
by mark klepac

One Last Mass
by bonnie milne gardner

CHARACTERS: WILLIAM, a very young priest. Energetic, impassioned.

SETTING: 1990s. Outside a small church in the remote mountains of Peru.

[Single spot on WILLIAM, holding a simple long muslin dress. In the deep shadows behind WILLIAM, a row of people stand motionless with their backs to him.]

WILLIAM
[He puts the gown down carefully and looks up, smiles]
Just look at the heavens tonight. Brillantes! It still catches me by surprise every time I look up. Our seminary was too close to the lights of the city for me to appreciate the stars. But here, up in the Andes, they seem to thrive on the clean air and ancient secrets.
Father, what should I do? Very soon the sun will be up. That is when I must make my decision. Ha, so ironic! The Incas were called "the children of the sun," and the Aztecs made human sacrifices to fend off the powers of darkness. (Laughs) My bishop would not approve.

Tomorrow will mark a full year that I have lit the two candles for Mass here. Oh, it is a beautiful church. The mammoth bronze doors, the ornate bell tower. Impressionante! When they showed me the photos, I was dumbfounded. This is to be my first parish?!
"Calm down, brother William," they said, "it is a very poor village in a remote area of Peru." "Then why such a glorious building?" I asked. And they explained that it was once a flourishing city, when the Spanish Viceroy ruled and the silver mines were ripe. The pope sent missionary priests all over South America to serve the faithful. And now it was my turn. "Brother William, are you sure?" they warned. "There are no modern conveniences. The work is hard." (Laughs) Unlike my fellow priests, I have no interest in computers or fine wines. Just give me a patch of earth for my pepper plants, a few shelves for my history books, and a people to care for.

But oh, the roads! Rock and dust, little more than a path in some places. The llama carrying my sacramental dishes nearly fell down a steep gorge! The two Gonzalez boys had met me at the train, and it took us three hours to climb to the village--to this sacred House of God. That first Sunday, the sanctuary was bursting with the locals and I was ecstatic. Juanita, my housekeeper, just laughed. "Oh, Padre, many of these people are not even Catholic," she said, "they are just curious to see the new priest."

For eight months, it was peaceful. Tranquilo. I got to know the villagers as we did God's work. We fixed the church steps, cleaned out the well, and re-established the children's lessons. Most of these people still speak a variation of the old Incan language called "Quechua." So I made them a deal. Every time they mastered a new English word, I would learn one in their language. But nothing meant more to them than the cartload of used tools I scavenged from a parish near Lima. Shovels, hoes, and hammers. They took such pride in fixing the chicken pens, and enlarging the gardens. Called it a true miracle. Un milagro!

Then, one Sunday I was clearing away communion. Mrs. Gonzalez came crying--"hijo mio!"-- her oldest boy was found dead near the well. A bullet in his head.

[One person in the shadows falls]

"Rebels," people said. "Tupac Amaru." But Juanita assured me it was only an adolescent feud. "Who would come all this way? We have nothing here." I sent word to the nearest authorities, but they did not answer. The boy's mother brought me clean clothes to bury him in, and I prepared my first requiem mass. Then, two weeks later an old couple were killed, and all their goats taken.

[Two more people in the shadows fall]

The villagers begged me to protect them. "Tupac Amaru have come to hide on our mountain!" I traveled ten miles to the nearest phone. But no one would come. The Tupac grew in number, and took over the houses outside the village. They killed chickens and pigs, and raided the gardens. One night, a group of villagers attacked their main hideout with shovels and hammers, but the rebels shot them all dead. For the first time, Juanita was silent as she brought the burial clothes.

[Four more people in the shadows fall]

Most of the people packed a few possessions and left. My bishop urged me to go, too. But Juanita was still here, and also a few church elders who had never left this village. We slept together in the sanctuary for safety, and prayed every night that the rebels would move on. But our gardens had been bountiful, and the Tupac feasted on them.

Last night . . . they came. . . into the church, looking for wine. Five of them--barely men. I invited them to join us in holy prayer, but they yelled something in Quechua and started to beat me. Juanita and the others intervened . . . and the rebels opened fire. Dios mio!

[The remaining people fall]

One of the Tupac helped me up. "Do not worry, Padre, you will not be killed. We need you to tend the gardens and perform the sacraments for us."

[He picks up the gown]

I have one last body to prepare, and one final requiem mass. Juanita was the first villager to greet me when I arrived. "Father William," she said, "You are too young and good looking to be a priest!"

[For the first time, he breaks down briefly]
These Tupac have destroyed an entire people. Just like the Spanish conquerors and the Tolmec before them. Smallpox, slavery, genocide. For what? Wealth? Power? And who will come along to wipe out these rebels? The ancient ones were wrong. Human sacrifice does not give power to the light—only the darkness.

[He studies the gown affectionately, then lays it down]

I cannot stay here and take confessions from murderers. I will start down the mountain at sunup. They may kill me, they may not. But my God is not here. There will be no one to give last rights to these demons.

END

For performance permission, visit http://bmgardner.weebly.com

Bali
by traci thompson

I Can't Wait 'Til Black History Month
by markia c.t. brooks

I can't wait till Black History Month
They'll play *Roots: The Next Generations* late at night.
I can wear my dashiki on Fridays, maybe I
won't press the girls' hair
Maybe
they'll lecture at the library
On Dr. King, the boycott, and something with
peanuts
for the kids with coloring books too.
Bring your own crayons or
Douglas gets a yellow fro. The
last page doesn't need much:
Lincoln smiles over children with black cotton ball heads on top
grey scale burlap sacks.
I always stay late.
College kids talk. They marvel at Baldwin some years
shaking their heads at Hughes.
I watch them blow smoke over the same fire pit:
"Back to Africa" "Every month should be Black History Month" "Get rid of it!"
I say I can't wait.

Shape
by traci thompson

Gut Experience
by rob michael ridenour

"Today you're going to be the butcher," my father said to me as we walked out to the garage.

I looked at his hands which were covered in blood. Seeing them like that never bothered me because they were the best thing about him. They felt like sandpaper and were tough as leather, especially on nights when it rained hard. He'd sit on the bed and hold them tightly around me as the thunder outside would rumble and shake the walls and windows of my room. Sometimes, I'd even fall asleep on them. Their roughness was soothing.

He opened the garage doors and hanging from the ceiling on the rusty gambrel was his latest trophy, a female doe that had been shot through the chest. I walked up to its body and looked into its dead eyes. I'd done this many times before, but today it felt different. I felt like a man.

"Well, what do you think?" He asked.

I turned around and ran into his burly arms. "Thanks dad. This is going to be so awesome."

Reaching into his camouflaged jacket, he pulled out his hunting knife. He placed the blade into my shaking hands.

He knelt down in front of me, gripping my shoulders tightly.

The shaking stopped when I looked him in the eyes.

"You've seen me do this many times. You can do it," he said.

I nodded.

"Yes, sir."

I walked over to the carcass pulling it tightly by the tail to get a better view between the doe's legs. I looked back at my dad, and he was staring at me while running his bloody fingers through his curly beard leaving gory smears all over it.

He was always a clean man, but after a fresh kill it never crossed his mind to wash himself off. It was a ritual for him to be dirty during the skinning.

"Go ahead," he said. My attention went back to the dead body and I brought my own fingers up to my chin becoming more focused on the task at hand.

I plunged the blade into its cold flesh, moving my hand in a circular motion, making sure to keep my grip steady.

"That's it. Good technique."

Shining red musculature could now be seen underneath. I had a clear view of where to make the hole to begin gutting her.

I took a deep breath and then moved the knife into position around the gut area. The palm of my hand began to sweat and I wiped it off on my shirt.

"Relax. You've got this," he calmly said to me while pulling out the silver flask that kept his attention at night when mother would go to sleep.

"One day we'll be able to share this together when you get older."

"I'm never going to drink that stuff. It eats up your liver," I said.

"Did your mother tell you that?"

"No. My friend Demetrius said so."

"Demetrius?" He paused. "Huh?" He took another swing from the flask. "*Demetrius*."

Suddenly, the garage light burned out, and I looked back to see that my father's face was hidden in shadow.

"Damn," he said under his breath.

"You want me to go get another bulb?"

"No. I want you to remain focused on what you're doing."

Adjusting my eyes to the natural light coming through the garage door, I went to plunge the knife into the area that I had marked with my finger, but before I could, it was taken out of my hand. I looked back at my father, surprised.

"Hold on, son. You're doing something wrong."

I gave him a confused look.

"That's what you've always done."

"You didn't pay close enough attention," he said making the hole at the exact spot I was going to.

"Remember, you don't want too go to far in here because you'll puncture the guts." He took his index finger and made the opening a little bigger. He then brought out the gut hook and put it at the top of the hole.

"I thought I was going to do this?"

"Maybe next time. I wasn't comfortable with the way you were approaching it."

I stood quietly off to the side as he began to guide the hook down the belly allowing the skin to open wider so he could get a better view of the guts. They always smelled the same: a concoction of raw sewage, urine, and blood mixed together that would make most people sick.

I was feeling queasy.

"So this *Demetrius* you mentioned... Who is he?"

"He's my friend."

"Are you *close* friends?"

"Yeah, pretty close. He's really nice to me."

"How *nice*?"

"He helps me with math. He wants to be a scientist when he grows up." He began to cut the guts away from the backbone and diaphragm. "He probably will to. He's very smart."

"Are there any cute girls in your class?"

"I don't pay attention really."

"Why not?"

"I like to focus on what the teacher is saying."

"Oh, right." He said followed by a thunderous belch.

His cutting hand was moving faster than I'd ever seen before. Chunks of pink intestines were flying into his beard and clothes.

"Aren't there any girls that could help you with math?"

"No."

He pulled the guts out and let them hit the cement floor with a wet thud.

"Have you even asked any?"

"Demetrius helps me. He's all I need."

He took his knife and slowly began to cut away the hides on the legs. With great strength that I never seen in him before, he jerked the left leg's hide all the way off. It was like he'd just peeled off one side of a banana. He stopped what he was doing and took a deep breath. He walked to a corner in the garage and grabbed a snow shovel.

"Do me a favor. Take this and clean up the floor so I can finish."

"Can't I watch you?"

He shook his head.

"I need to concentrate."

He took out the flask and finished off its contents with one big gulp.

My heart skipped a beat. He'd always allowed me to watch him.

I took the guts to the dumpster behind our house. I stared at the organs as they slid off the shovel and down in between the trash bags that had gathered over the past week. Hungry flies began to feast upon them. My gut went cold, and before I knew it, my breakfast was now covering the organs too.

Back inside the garage, Father had finished field dressing the doe. He'd taken the hides and hung them on hooks next to the flayed body, now headless. Father was sitting at his work bench starring at the decapitated head running his fingers through his beard again.

"Are you okay, dad?" I asked.

He turned around with a big grin on his face.

"I feel like a million bucks, champ."

"I really wanted to be the butcher today."

"You will. You're just not ready yet."

"I was doing it right."

"No, no you weren't. Just trust me on this."

"I do, but I still don't get it."

"That's exactly why you're not ready."

"Can I invite Demetrius to our next hunting trip?"

He stood up, holding the doe's head in his hands and walked over to me. He began to run his bloody fingers through my hair. Blood stuck to the top of my scalp.

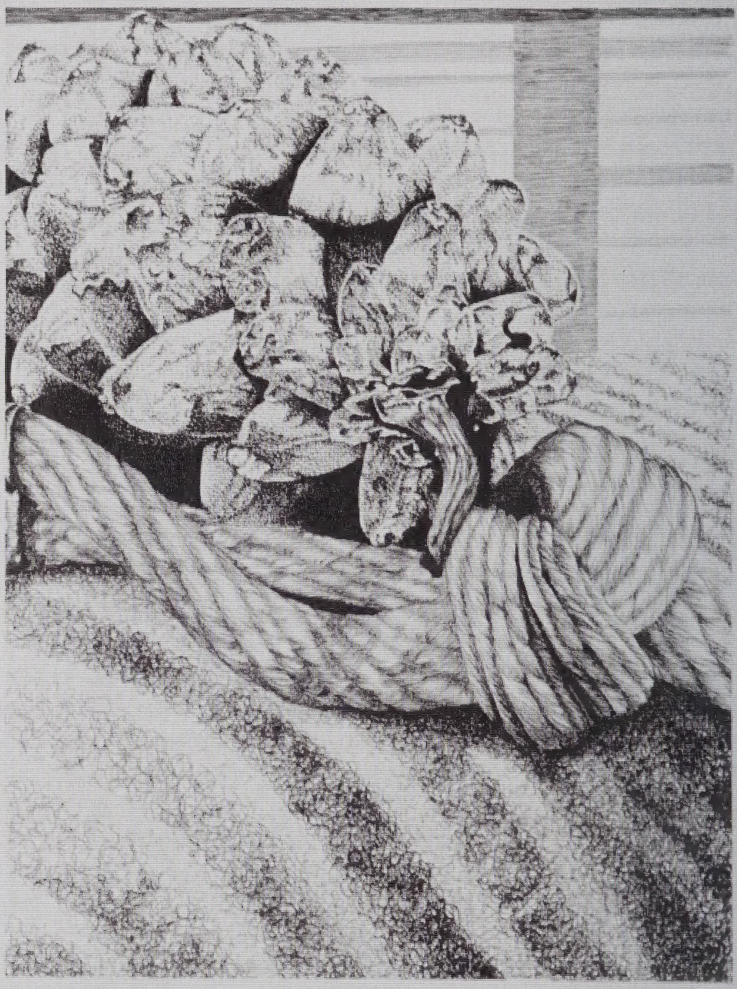
He smiled.

"I gotta get cleaned up and so do you. I want you to wash really good behind those ears. You promise"

"I promise."

He tucked the head under his arm and grabbed my hand. They were tough as always, but the blood made them sticky and hard to hold onto. My hand slipped out of his. I tried to grab a hold of it again, but the same thing happened. Father continued, walking to the house, never looking back.

I looked at my hand, covered in the doe's blood.



Texture
by ana kateri salas montano

Looking for Elias
by maggie shoup

Sam screamed like he'd been stabbed in the jugular when I tossed the drink in his face. Bet he was angling for an even score over the bruises. "My eyes! My eyes!"

"What the fuck about them?" I replied, noting the purple drops slowly ebbing off the cracked ceiling like spattered blood, and the acrid smell of plaster and cheap wine. We'd been in a wrestling match over my car keys again. He pocketed the keys smugly and planted his rugby shoulders in front of the door as if to emphasize that I would take what I had earned. I rubbed my twisted fingers while Sam complained about the strained muscle he got throwing me against the wall. He caressed his pecs and reminded me that I had done it again.

One day at an extra-long stop light, Elias had told me he would good and leave me if I asked for a divorce. "Shut up," I replied. "You are only a fetus." He responded with a plume of anger that hit me icy hot around the navel. I knew he meant it.

Now Elias was gone, his tiny curved spine lost in the gray mash and stringy blood ejected by my dysfunctional uterus. Maybe I had displeased him. Maybe he had other plans.

Elias would be nine weeks and four days. My breasts would be heavy with milk. My eyes would be swollen as I yawned the stroller up our long sidewalk and claimed to the neighbors that I hadn't folded laundry in a week. No one likes a woman who can do everything.

The old mahogany dresser resisted as I pried open the top drawer and dug for the stash I'd sworn to bury in the yard next to the dead chickens and an aged hermit crab. Soft striped pants. Cotton diaper hemmed in rainbow thread. Wool booties with slippery satin strings.

A splinter from the oak drawer bottom jabbed my thumb. "Are you in there?" I whispered, sucking off a drop of blood. I took a guilty glance backward to see that Sam wasn't looking, and sorted my prize into a baby-shaped lump on the bed. I wondered if Elias had found a new uterus, one that didn't come with a lazy bitch or a dad who thought maybe we could go for the vacuum thing if it was too late to do it with the pills. No one answered.

Elias had said there was a damn good reason Sam should stay, and if I couldn't trust him, whom could I trust? He had excellent grammar for a fetus; he was almost urbane, and consequently, very popular. Most evenings his companions congregated on the back porch in the dark where I sat listening to spring peepers, pulling the bitter petals out of yellow dandelions one by one. No one would give me answers. Apparently they thought I couldn't take it. All they wanted to discuss was the fallacy of time, my unnatural attachment to physical manifestation, and the sentient nature of the universe itself. I was rarely in the mood and frequently interrupted, demanding "What's your name,

damnit? Where did you come from?" Eventually they stopped coming around. I started gathering cigarette butts instead of dandelions, picking out the freshest bits of tobacco and rubbing the coarse strands under my nose.

When the lavender constellations on the ceiling had faded and the rosy welts around my wrists had yellowed, I made plans. "Get the fuck out," I said. This was my plan. "I mean it this time. Go stay with your mistress, the fat one."

"Her boyfriend wouldn't like it. Anyway, I have the flu. Tomorrow."

"Fuck your flu. You're drunk."

Sam grabbed the edge of a curtain to pry off a beer top, which he tossed with a clatter against the front door. "Not drunk. Haven't had a drop," he said, rubbing the greasy stubble on his chin with the hand that clutched the bottle. He took a long chug, then trotted into the bedroom and slept.

The next evening he emerged, blinking like a troglodyte, carrying with him a waft of sour sweat and breathing out the odor of fermented apples. I wondered where he had stashed the liquor. His left knee buckled and half his face hung easy and soft. "Still not dwinking," he muttered. His tongue scraped the left side of his teeth. He laughed hard until he fell against the peeling door frame, and called me a paranoid bitch. I blinked deeply and pressed my palms together. A finger waggled in my face while I counted backward. There was a clear drip out of the left side of his mouth. I finished counting backward and started forward: two months since your due-date, Elias, six months since you left, eight since the sonographer said you were one of those stubborn types who needed to be coaxed into growing up. Still had a tail. Resisted full fingers and toes. I wondered if they would take you at term and I would carry you around in a basket, tiny and translucent, showing you that the world was really a fine place and you could get to it already. Twelve since Sam suggested we dispose of you. "Your baby killer girlfriend give you that idea?" I had yelled. "What girlfriend?" he had lied.

At twelve, Sam's knees buckled. He wiped the spittle off his unshaven chin with the back of his hand and let me get him into the car. I wished I could stick him in the trunk to avoid the smell of what I suspected was something to do with death. I looked at the empty baby seat and wondered if Elias was hanging around the hospital with the other babies. Maybe I'd run into him in the ER where I had passed clots the size of baseballs into a cold silver pan while the nurse with hairy knuckles muttered something about "products of conception." What a way to be born.

Sam wriggled on the blue cot while the doctor spoke, asking for a candy bar. We could see that his legs were already failing. There was no easy way to get the news. "Technically, he should already be dead," the doctor said thinly, pursing his lips. "He has three weeks, maybe, unless someone can get that thing out of his head." Sam giggled. His left eye rotated lazily. I leaned into the cold metal bedframe and vomited. There was no sign of Elias.

Sam's legs had failed him completely by the time I completed the paperwork and tucked an arsenal of pills into my purse. "You want to go

home, buddy?" a meaty and cheerful orderly asked as we lifted him into a wheel chair. Sam's eyes lobbed about like stray balloons. Pretty soon he would be shitting himself and aspirating the teaspoonfuls of water I administered on schedule. Instead of waking every two hours to breastfeed, an angry alarm reminded me to take his blood pressure. A run-in with a single stray grain of rice would lead to a pneumonia scare.

"Why isn't it you?" I pleaded with Elias. Feed, bathe, wake in a panic that you are still breathing. Make sure you can wiggle your fingers and toes. Wipe your messy nose, hold you against my chest, promise I will love you until you die.

"Prison guard!" Sam shouted. He shoved a finger in his nostril. His words were slurred, but I had learned his new language quickly. "Ungrateful," I muttered. He didn't notice. I adjusted the blankets and patted his pillow until he quieted. He didn't rise again until one good gasp resurrected him. Then he fell down flat and still. When the medics arrived, I was pumping his chest so hard they got a pulse. I noticed Elias lingering outside the door. "See?" he said. "I told you." That was the last I saw of him.

Visit to the Louvre

by traci thompson

Jazz Addiction
by mark puckett

Miles Davis stares
at Truman Capote
in a coma

a cold trumpet now
the writer almost
dead before him

we've been
crushed down
this is the scene

pull guns
from our pockets
shoot dead our dreams

there
is
then . . .

a sonic drowning
as we chisel letters
on a concrete page

thinking
about
words

and
color
and

music
and rage
baby, rage

Fire Pits
by mark klepac

Bleached
by magnolia wilson

How to tell the difference between alive and dead:
Poke it.
Does it squirm or is it folding its clothes neatly into a suitcase?
Check for a pulse.
Is it beating or is it flapping its wings one thousand four hundred forty-seven miles away from you?
Ask it a question.
Like what do you want for breakfast or are you still really in this?
Either way, put the coffee on the stove.
Kiss it.
Do its eyes roll back into its head, does it moan, or does it just turn over in bed?

How do you really tell the difference between alive and dead?
You already know.
Look at the shark's tooth placed up on the shelf.
Attached now more to memory than muscle.
Is it bleeding or is it bleached?
Bleached.

Repeating History
by joseph jamison

He swallows a yellow kernel each morning
as prescribed, enters the classroom with focus

And we begin to teach him.

But he reads feudalism as fecundity,
colony as coronary.

Bypassing Magellan with a mumble
He asks me to simply tell him
which multiple choice to click. A, B, C, or D?
I ask what he read on the previous
Webpages? "The Chapter." He says.
Ask what he read and receive more generality
Ask what he read: "I don't know."
Ask what he read -
Ask what, never mind, the answer is C.

He learns nothing,
But he's sitting still.
Still, cannot read, but he's listening
SO I explain vassals, lords and lepers the old-fashioned way
All the things, he was supposed to have read.

I say. I repeat.
He understands, with a nod
"When in doubt, go with C."
He knows nothing.

His walnut hairs shrug over shoulders
lifting a cautious chest and a deer's silhouette.
The emblem of some hunting brand
ironed over an odd,
oddly oversized Tee.
An image camouflaged by faint stains of dirt,
coughed across him from yesterday's
raucous through the wood;.
A young boy's small town revival.

I repeat myself.

He understands, with a nod
"When in doubt, go with C."
He knows, he knows nothing.

So we switch modes, maybe
a fast paced viral drama,
with primary colors and whips
Pints and bangs and of course blood.
Because learning is bloody.
He becomes stimulated,
In the dark room with just enough cover
to slip a pinch in the learned
pouch of his under aged lip.
Because learning takes time.

Still, sitting, still
His blue eyes become glass, embossed
Like little screens themselves.
Pixilate wonder at the queerly dressed
man discovering America.

The boy's fifth generation Native skin
forgets its heritage under the ambiguous glow
of a lesson better taught through live action.

We review,
Having learned nothing
But take the exam anyways.
Because history is an exercise
best repeated.

Alive and Well
by logan marshall guarglia

The Fourth Night the Man Couldn't Sleep

by eric overbey

They met at a bar and she came back to his house within an hour of him greeting her with his hand placed on the back of the barstool she was seated in. When he first came into the bar and saw her sitting beneath the soft yellow light from the lamps, running her finger around the top of her glass, he thought that she might be one he could really love.

They lie in bed with the comforter up to their chests, him with his hands at his side and her twisting her hair around her finger.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No, you can stay."

It is over now and part of him wants her to leave, but another part of him doesn't, because she is why he went to the bar in the first place. Worse than that, he wishes he could somehow leave. It was he who started it all and he that got what he wanted, and when he finished he was no longer attracted to her and she was still kissing him. He only wanted to smoke a cigarette and sleep. Her lips were dry and between each kiss she licked her lips and apologized until he turned his head to look for the pack of cigarettes that was next to the box of tissues on the dresser. The cardboard lid of the pack is open, some of the cigarettes halfway out.

Still playing with her hair, she inches her body to the left so their shoulders are touching.

"I don't have to stay. You look tired."

"I want you to stay."

"Okay."

"Do you want to watch a movie?"

"But, you're tired."

"I know."

She puts her arm on his chest. He doesn't like the comforting nature of the gesture but he doesn't say anything. He thought she was going to be one that he could love, but she gave him exactly what he went to the bar for and that's why he couldn't love her.

"We can just talk, then."

"Okay."

He hasn't slept in days. He dislikes his job as an outsourced janitor and has no one to come home to, no one to think about while he is at the job. When he comes home at night, sometimes in the very early morning, the house is quiet and the only place open is the bar. The job is as quiet as the house, the cleaning done after businesses close. The loudest sound he hears is the vacuum cleaner that runs three hours out of a seven hour shift, and to him, the noise doesn't last long enough.

He had walked into the bar, sat down and ordered a straight whiskey and, when the bartender poured it, he drank it all in one gulp. It stopped his hands from shaking and gave him what he needed to approach the woman,

who was staring down into her glass of white wine, her legs crossed beneath a black dress that stopped just above the knees. He sat there for ten minutes, periodically glancing at her and waiting for the alcohol to kick in. She didn't lift her head to look around the place and only spoke to the bartender when she needed a refill. He liked that she wasn't wearing makeup and he liked even more that she didn't try to look happy to be there.

He stood up and began in her direction. Before, the room was loud — the speakers playing a raucous rock album and the people in the back standing at their high tables and chatting — but now, in the numbed steps he was taking, it was quiet and intimate and she turned to him when he got close enough to consider, her lips thin and neutrally positioned, her eyes like fresh olive paint. In his insomnia, he had given up shaving and the uneven landscape of his facial hair shined beneath the lamp above her seat.

"Isn't this type of place awful?" he said.

"What type is that?"

He removed his hand from her seat and sat down next to her. He rotated the bowl of peanuts in front of him by running his finger along the bottom of the bowl.

"The type of place where everyone's here for something but doesn't admit what that something is."

"What is that something?"

"A distraction."

"Is that why you're here?

"No." He faked a laugh, loud and rhythmic. It was unlike his normal silent and static one. "I'm here because I can't sleep."

"Right there with ya'."

The bed squeaked as he scratched his back. He missed the chance to let her leave and now fluid conversation is gone and they are stuck in the same bed, touching but disconnected, both looking at the white ceiling. She removes her hand from his chest and picks at a hangnail with her other hand.

"What do you do for work?"

"I'm a janitor. It's a temporary job."

"Do you like it?"

Now that it is over, the lamp, that has been on the whole time, seems brighter. His eyelids edge downward, ready to close, as ready as they have been since the last time he went to the bar.

"It's fine...quiet. What do you do?"

She closes her eyes and folds her hands on top of the comforter.

"I'm a waitress."

"Do you like it?"

"Not really. I want to be the chef."

She asks him what time it is and he tells her he doesn't know. He keeps the clock beneath the bed so he doesn't look at it when he can't sleep. They lie in silence for several minutes, eyes closed, listening to frogs croak outside, until a train, half a mile away, bundles down the tracks and overtakes

the sound of the frogs, shaking the windows of the house.

"I'm gonna go," she finally says, when everything goes quiet. She dresses and they hug, and then he walks with her to the front door and makes sure to lock it behind her.

He looks at the empty bed. He feels guilty and anxious. He grabs one of the cigarettes that is half out of the pack and smokes it, sitting up in bed with the ashtray in his lap. It calms his nerves but the nicotine aggravates his sinuses and his nose begins to run. He gets a tissue from the box on the dresser, blowing his nose with it, then matting it up for the trash. In the moment, the relief from the cigarette is worth the runny nose, but he knows the anxiety will come back and he'll have to smoke again, and his nose will run and he'll reach for another tissue.

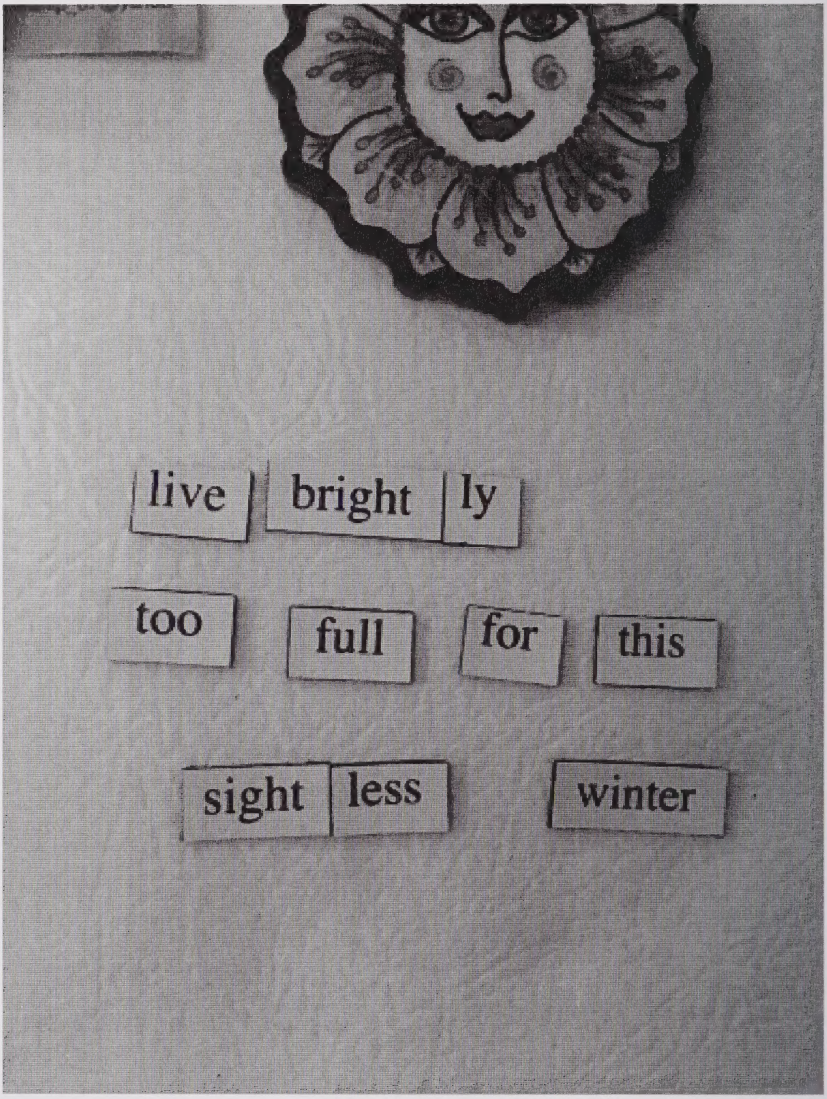
Blue
by joanna maldonado

Nursling
by maggie shoup

Sometimes in the night
insistent fingers pinching at my raw breast
his head smelling of soil and mangos,
there is nothing left to take.
What else can be pillaged?
Bones were rearranged, my skin carved into.
Even time was thieved by his suckling mouth,
that new fast clock bearing down
on the obligations of birth, sustenance, death,
moments between essential steps compressed.
My bright-faced babe, he is Einstein's wicked train
altering what I know even of the passage of time;
his death would be mine.

Fingers flutter against my navel, excavating a line
between what is his and what may I retain
a vicious gulf laying out so broad, into it drains
even the brightness of my mind
with his sweat soaked curls
and perhaps I am too tired to eat. Perhaps
my nails blacken and
the glib illuminations of my face sink,
drawn into the swirl of his cavernous mouth.

Once I teased death. Each precipice
mocked, caressed.
Now I plead and supplicate
for my milky bird-boned love.
Every ounce of me goes in offering,
some given, some stolen
torn to pieces
by bitter crows
and by the sharpness of men
or boys who will be men,
bread and blood
for my nursling.



Refrigerator Winter
by sara wheeler

Caiden
by caroline padgett

"Do you have any children?"
She asks.
I pause, my intestines curl back on themselves
reaching for my throat.
I can taste the chili I had for lunch
hours ago.
I swallow down the left
over sorrow.

"No."
And another
piece of your memory floats down the
Davidson River
like the grey grit and white bone of your ashes,
those too,
I can taste.

Time stretches like the marks you left me,
the constant tick tock of burdened memory
that you did, in fact,
Exist.

The Nurse with sterile eyes,
rushed feet, tries to take
you from me.
But my instincts know skin to skin,
warm flesh to flesh;
this is what is good for babies.
Even the ones that
are blue,
like you.

My chest aches, my
Breasts swollen
full of milk to nourish
a still, small body who will not
need it.

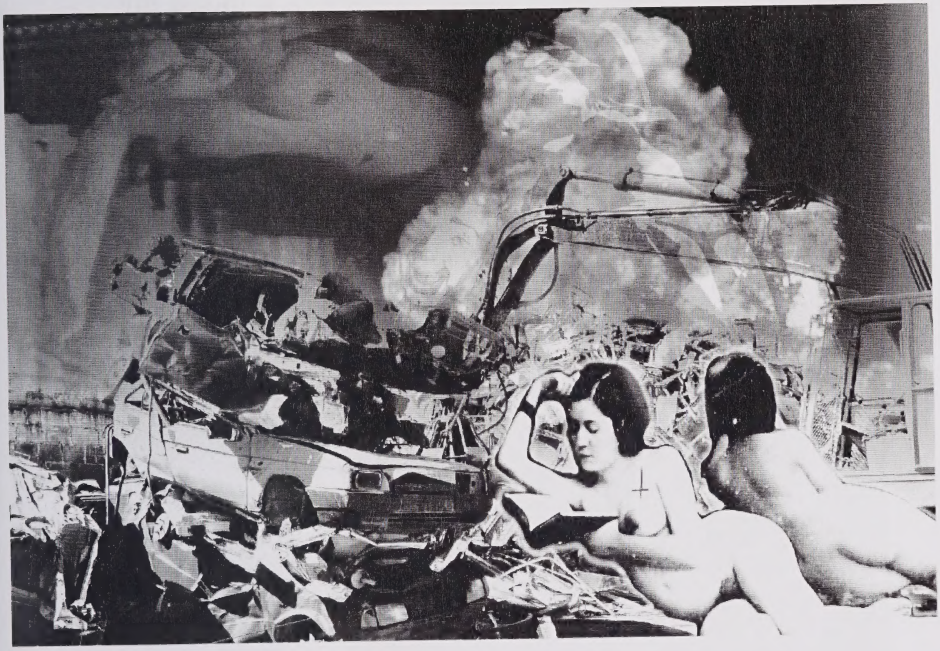
Ice packs placed
bound tight, suffocating
my fertile body
trying to convince nature
Winter has arrived,

Too soon.

We laughed in our secret language
written on pink walls that
translate into spirals of DNA
that made you real.

You had my nose,
your father's feet.
Blood to Blood
Mother to Son.

"Do you have any children?"
He asks.
"No," I say again;
it's easier that way.
And a piece of me shrivels,
and drowns
with you.



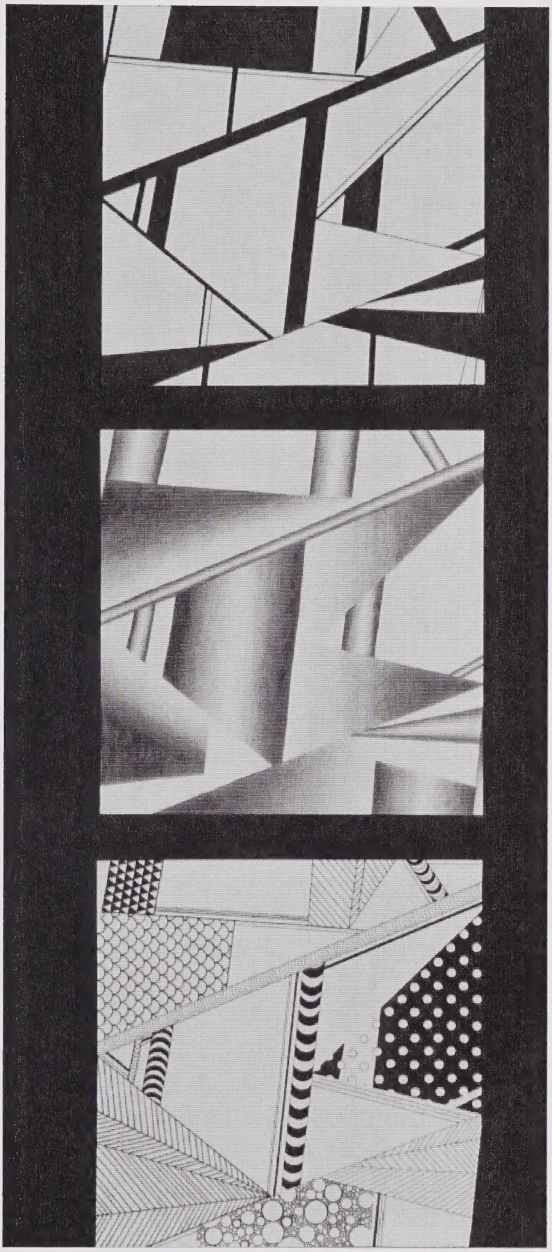
Untitled
by cathryn b. campbell

What a Teacher Said
by markia c. t. brooks

What a teacher said after someone let slip the word nigger
fluttered and preened around the room until it found my
eyes as guillotines for an
open
discussion
Soon my head spun

I said it with an A
I've attended several conferences

I blinked but no one was looking



Not Uli
by ana kateri salas montano

Church Pew: FOR SALE
by ellen j. perry

Every Easter weekend in the South Carolina foothills, Roger Ballard had Good Friday off work. He'd been with Super-Sod for the past twenty years or so, and they were good about giving their men time off at the big religious holidays. Springtime was the prettiest season. The redbud bloomed and pink dogwoods dotted the neighborhood yards. Roger and his crew laid most of those yards with sod at one time or another. He and his wife Louise had lived together in Traveler's Rest for over thirty years even though there wasn't much to the town. Or at least there wasn't much to it when, as teenagers, they went on dates at Tastee Freez and pretty soon got married at Redemption Baptist Church.

A little ways outside of Greenville, T.R. had grown a lot but not the right kind of growing, Roger didn't think. The locals called it "T.R." The rest of them, from off, starting coming to town and working at sales offices, insurance companies, QuikTrip stores, fast food restaurants. Roger and Louise still liked Cecil's Diner and Cox's Dime Store best. Roger told Louise he'd take Cecil's Family Breakfast Special over a rubbery egg on a dang muffin any day. Roger liked working out in the open air, too, laying sod. Their skinny pale neighbor down the street who'd moved from Hendersonville, over the state line, went to work every morning in a sport coat and probably sat in a cubicle, doing no-telling-what and not-much-of-anything so far as Louise and Roger could tell. He drove back home every evening by 5:30 and nobody saw him again until next morning. Him and that Prius.

At their house where they could look out the kitchen window and see Cecil's wife, Darlene, hanging out clothes to dry (she never would put her underpants next to Cecil's on the line even though they'd been married a thousand years), Roger and Louise used to color Easter eggs with that PAAS kit and organize egg hunts in the yard. Their twin daughters, Wanda and Wendy, loved all this until they got in high school and had other things to do like marching band and the youth bell choir at church. Roger still wanted to color eggs even to this day, but Louise always frowned and said she didn't want to fool with it; that vinegar smell was terrible, and their one grandbaby, Wanda's Jack, was too little to know what was going on. "Let's just get some of them candy eggs from Cox's and set 'em out on the dinette table," Louise said. And that was that.

So on Good Friday, Roger sat on his long, narrow front porch in a rickety green and white lawn chair, staring at the statue of Jesus in their yard and waving off bees. Just last Sun-

day after the final service at Redemption Baptist Church, Louise asked Preacher Leonard if she could have the statue since the church had suddenly gone bankrupt (which was a mystery because surely all the faithful in Traveler's Rest had been putting in their tithes regular – hm!). Wanda told her mother during lunch after church at Cecil's Diner that this was awful, that she ought not to bother Preacher Leonard about anything, Jesus statue or no, during this difficult time of financial and spiritual distress. Wanda always talked like she was the parent, even when she was in primary school.

Louise sipped her iced tea and said, "Ain't but one thing Preacher Len's going to do with that statue, and that is sell it like everything else down at the flea market. Why not take it before somebody else does? I paid him ten dollars, and I like the idea of Jesus watching over our yard."

Wanda frowned but Wendy laughed, bouncing her nephew on her knees. The sisters looked identical but were so different, opposites in almost every way. "Well, I guess it can't hurt," Wendy said. "Jack can learn about the Lord and his mercies early on. Maybe Jesus will help get the Bradford pears going. Daddy noticed they're blooming kind of late this year."

Roger nodded slowly and glanced out the red-curtained window of their booth, chewing his last bite of sausage biscuit. "I wonder why that is."

One full week later – and still no cottony Bradford pear blooms – Roger sat on the porch and looked up, squinting from the bright South Carolina sun. T. Bob drove by the house in his noisy pick-up, waved, and then turned around in the dirt road to say hey and sit. "Hey," T. Bob said to Roger as he plopped down and settled in the other ancient lawn chair until it creaked. Roger and T. Bob had gone to high school together. Sometimes they met up at T. Bob's Bar and Grill for some steaks and, when Louise was at choir practice or visiting a shut-in with her Sunday school class, a couple of beers.

"Hey," Roger said.

"What're you doing with that Jesus?" T. Bob asked.

"Oh, Louise asked the preacher for him last Sunday after church."

T. Bob said, "Huh. Well, there he is."

"Yep, there he is," Roger said, looking up toward the eaves as if he expected something big to happen up there. Maybe even Jesus, the real one, might be coming back down for the Time of Tribulation. Or did the Rapture happen first? He couldn't remember. A wasp descended and bobbed around between the men. Roger grabbed the rusted arms of the lawn chair to help

him get up, stiff from his last job. "There's a nest up there. I've got to get another can of spray," he said, dodging the wasp and ducking into the house, letting the screen door slam behind him.

T. Bob yawned and glanced around. The yard looked good; daffodils were popping up. *Boring!* thought T. Bob, who liked to take risks and see what-all was out in the world to see. T. Bob decided right there on the porch that Roger needed some fun. Him and Louise hadn't done much of nothing for a long time. Matter of fact, they mostly sprayed wasp nests and went to church. Maybe they could go on vacation, Myrtle Beach or something. T. Bob could tell them a thing or two. He'd been married and divorced twice, and now he was enjoying the good life. His son Bobby helped him run the bar so he could have a little time to piddle around and fish and travel, mostly to Myrtle where he went every year during Bike Week. The latest tattoo he got down there was of a cross and a Harley Springer, somehow intertwined. Preacher Len, who saw the tattoo at church, approved of the cross but wasn't so sure about the Springer. "Priorities," Len had said. "The Lord wants to be first in our lives." T. Bob liked the tattoo just fine.

Roger came back out and aimed some bee spray at the top corner of the sagging porch. "Can't hardly sit out here without them wasps worrying you to death."

"Y'all going to the community supper over at the bar in a couple weeks?" T. Bob asked. "I've been trying to talk it up." He lowered his voice and leaned in. "We'll have the liquor in the back so Louise and them won't get too fussy."

"I don't know," Roger sighed, sitting down heavily and dropping the bee spray beside his chair, letting it roll to the door. "Got some sod jobs coming up and a new man on. Rodney wants me to train him."

"Well, the Bible says something about enjoying the good of your labor. Remember Len talking about that? Joyful abundance and all that."

"All I can remember about that sermon is, there is nothing new under the sun," Roger said, looking down at the worn and weathered planks of his porch.

Louise appeared suddenly, making a big show of closing the screen door in a quiet, deliberate way. "I'm going out for a little bit," she said, frowning at the spray can on its side. "I'll heat up some casserole after while. Don't y'all trip over that spray." She got in her Buick and the dust made the men cough.

"These lawn chairs are about to give out," T. Bob said. "Let's ride up to Len's and see if he's got some old chairs from the church he might could sell you."

"I hate to ask him, especially after the Jesus statue business."

"Aw, it wouldn't hurt to ask. Plus I want to find out more about this church money. Something weird about how fast all that went down."

Roger struggled to his feet again and shuffled to T. Bob's truck. They drove a few miles over to Redemption Baptist. Sure enough, there was Leonard, walking slowly from parsonage to church with all kinds of boxes and bags. The church sign still read, "Services at 9 and 11. ARE YOU READY TO MEET JESUS?"

"Hidy, Preacher Len," Roger called. The preacher nodded but didn't speak. Roger thought the man had looked pretty worn-out for a while. "Need some help?" he offered. "We got T. Bob's truck here with the trailer."

"Thanks," Len said. "Mostly I need to get stuff to the flea market or maybe just to the dump at this point. I could use a hand collecting what needs to go." He seemed overwhelmed, and Roger remembered his wife Debbie had gone out of town to stay with her mother for a while. That was weird, too, Roger thought, and T. Bob muttered something about it a few days back. But the men pitched in and asked no questions. T. Bob and Len picked up trash out by the cemetery, and Roger worked on his own in the quiet of the sanctuary.

After about an hour of clearing out dust and packing boxes, an idea bloomed in Roger's mind; he wiped his face with an old handkerchief and smiled. He sat on a pew, wrapped one hand under the seat to feel the oak foundation of the bench and, with the other, felt of the faded red cushioning. "Yep. This would be perfect on my front porch," he said aloud. Sure enough, his porch was shaped just right for a pew. It sounded crazy, but he wanted that pew now more than anything. He'd grown up in Redemption Baptist. Taking home a pew from the church could be a way to hold on to it all – to Vacation Bible School, Royal Ambassadors, getting saved, sputtering underwater being baptized, doing stuff with the youth group, marrying Louise, taking the girls to Vacation Bible School, watching the girls get baptized and married, everything all over again.

Next thing T. Bob knew, they were waving down one of the deacons who'd dropped by the church and loading up the pew in his trailer. Preacher Len just shrugged and said to the men, "Get rid of it." On the ride home T. Bob told Roger his latest theory about how Preacher Len might have been carrying on with the church secretary and gambling offering plate money over at the casino in Cherokee. "I tell you what, in a trash pile just now I found Harrah's brochures and a motel receipt! That secretary

went with him or helped him cover it all up, one." T. Bob had surely solved the mystery.

"They ain't nothing new under the sun," Roger said softly.

"It don't matter."

"I guess not," T. Bob said.

It took Roger, T. Bob, and Roger's son-in-law John, Jr. to get the pew off the trailer and onto the porch. All three sat on it and commented on how it fit just right.

"With Jesus over there," John, Jr. laughed, "It's about like being in church but without that invitation at the end that goes on and on."

T. Bob said, "Yeah. You can get up and go whenever you want to. Which I'm doing right now so I can pick up Dot for our date. See you boys!"

John, Jr. drove off, too, to get home to Wanda and Jack. Roger was left alone with a can of bee spray, his pew, and Jesus. He thought about Easter Sunday coming up and wondered if there was any PAAS in the house, maybe a kit left over from some other time. He was about to go in and look when he saw Louise pull up. She grabbed a few grocery bags out of the trunk, stared up at Roger on the porch.

"What in the Lord's name is that?" she asked, taking off her sunglasses. "Roger Ballard, what are you sitting on?"

"It's a pew I bought off of the preacher."

"What did you do that for?"

"Needed new chairs, thought this would look good on the length of this porch."

"Well, it don't."

"You got the Jesus statue. I figured this would go good with it."

"I don't want a old red pew on my porch. Take it to Len and see if he'll give you your money back. That's awful." Louise went in to put the groceries away and call the girls about Easter dinner. Probably they'd want ham and potato salad, banana pudding or coconut cake.

What I want never seems to matter, Roger thought.

Maybe T. Bob was right. Maybe he should work less. Maybe he should get a tattoo, maybe even go to Harrah's and gamble. Roger couldn't figure a way to make all this work with who he was, though, and who he wanted to be. Resigned, Roger sighed and stretched his arms around the back of the pew, savoring what time he had with it since it had to go. What... what was that? He felt around in the little pocket where pencils and offering envelopes usually were kept. There was something down in there, what?

Roger pulled out a crumpled church bulletin dating from a month or so back. Feeling a little thrill about finding secret information, maybe something scandalous, Roger read the scrawled notes quickly.

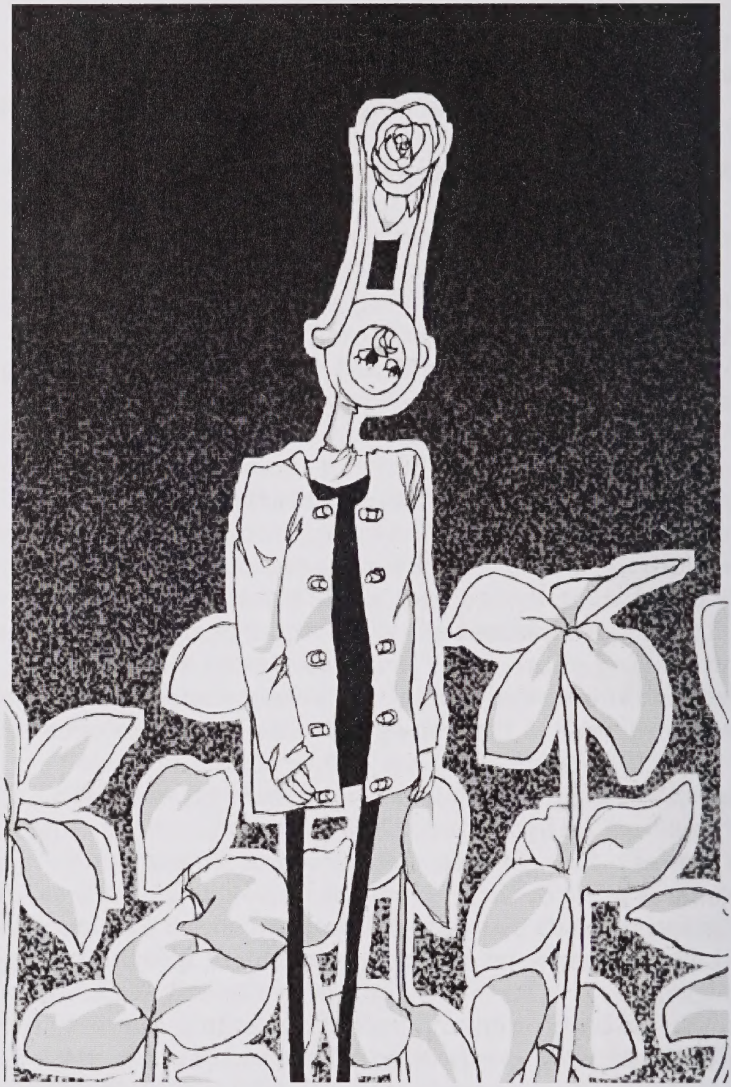
Meet me at the Handee GO after church
I cant. Mama and them wont let me. Going to IHOP w Aunt Maxie
After IHOP. Handee GO at 1:30, K?
Why?
I want to talk about the prom and what all happened
No. Over it
I dont want you talking to Troy no more. Handee GOOOOOOOOO! 1:30. Or Dixie Republic
Maybe Dixie Republic
No never mind, Troy the jackass works there

Right there in Traveler's Rest, at his home, on the pew, Roger laughed. He was suddenly awake, brought back to life by this connection. While he'd been zoning out during that sermon, apparently entitled, as the bulletin and church billboard sign said, "Are You Ready to Meet Jesus?", some teenagers were tuned out too and making plans. How long had it been since he and Louise wrote love notes in church, met in secret after school, did all those same things? A lifetime ago. It was all gone; Roger hung his head. *Over it*, the nameless girl had written.

But – the back of the bulletin had some typed verses. *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again... There is a time for everything... a time to search and a time to give up.*

Roger jumped to his feet. He walked over to the Jesus statue and whispered, quiet as the spring breeze making its way through dogwoods, "I'm not ready to meet you yet." With a grin, he loped off to his workroom and pulled out an old dusty "FOR SALE" sign. Roger propped the sign on the pew, tucked the wasp spray can by the wall where no one would trip over it, and then went inside to search for, to find, to remember, his wife.

"Louise?" Roger called. "Let's fix the ham together and dye some Easter eggs. The kids will be coming Sunday and that Bradford pear in the yard is about to bust loose with blooms. It's time."



in basil we trust

by bethany b. r. evans

One Day at a Time
by melanie yvonne white

One day at a time,
oh boy,
that's what they thought;
hell, I didn't even know if
I had one minute at a time.
My life is not a one day at a time type of life.
My life is moving fast; my addiction is driving me crazy; my thoughts are racing
taking me places where I, me, body, and soul
aren't even going,
and

here comes my mama
saying it again:
one day at a time.
Oh sweet Jesus,
help me to hold on to the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can.
which is only me, but hell where in the world did they get
one day at a time?

Hell my feet are saying today,
forget the next day.
Move feet, move feet, move.
I know somebody; I pass mama, aunts, cousins,
and a blast from the past is going to stop and say
one day at a time,

but how, when, and why I ask –
who, where and what.
Hell I'm fighting as hard as I can
to stay up, to stay sober,
to stay positive, to stay free,
to stay black, to stay me.

My blackness ain't say
one day at a time.
my addiction didn't say
one day at a time.
everything I was am thinking said now or never.

My fight didn't say one day at a time:
my mama said it,
my aunts said it,
my damn uncle James said it.

But when I laid on the steel of the mat,
my head hitting hard on the steel,
my legs cold and shivering from the wet cell,
the slop tray they gave me,
the shackles on my feet and legs and hands,
I closed my eyes and looked up at the grey walls that were caving in on me
and said thank God for
one day at a time.

Chellis
by ethan risinger

Chellis was told once
by her father
that her mother hits him
in ways she can't see yet.

Chellis can't see very far.
It's the orbs,
the shiny part
like on a toad's eye too.
They won't let her
stretch her eyelids
to see the whole sun.

Chellis likes how bleach smells now.
Bleach used to scare her
and make her feet wince.
Chellis' mother
makes big splashes with it
in front of Chellis'
bedroom door.

One time,
Chellis was looking
at a picture book
with photos taped in it.
There aren't any photos
of Chellis in there,
but everyone looks pretty.

In the photo book
two people were playing a game
with a racquet and a fence.
Chellis doesn't know who they are,
but they are looking at each other
and have red
on the top of their cheeks.
Chellis' mother caught her
hugging the pictures of the people
near the fence.

Her mother
only used the "hate" word once
at Chellis.
It was the time with the people
near the fence.
Chellis has never been
in a picture before,
she wonders how they put
the people inside,
and how they fit
a whole fence in there.

Her mother made Chellis
put the pictures in the fireplace.
When they lit up
it looked like a dress she had
when she was a baby.
The dress
was so pretty.
Chellis wondered
if she will look pretty like that
when she grows up
and sits in the fireplace.

Myself
by cathryn b. campbell

How to Become a Parent

Inspired by Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer"

by savannah j. willingham

First, try something, anything else. A doctor/one night stand. A doctor/European back packer. A doctor/Planned Parenthood Technician. Eve of Eden, before the Snake. Fail at all of it. It is best if you fail at an early age—say, twenty-one. Quickly thwarted ideals about the standard nuclear family are necessary so at twenty two you can judge the cuteness of your new bundle of joy to the starving children of Africa on TV, in those insomniac fueled infomercials that promise them meals for less than a dollar a day. Remember you breastfeed.

° ° °

Allow your sister to come hold the baby while you take your first shower of the week. She's kind and easily amused. Great with children. Come downstairs to find her telling your inexperienced offspring about why her marriage is failing.

You let her know that you read somewhere that babies can understand negative tones, even before they understand speech. She looks up at you with a face as empty as a glacier and asks what that has to do with her marriage. "Where exactly is the child's father today, again?" she'll inquire.

Take your small infant and remember the other book that said before the age of one, children perceive emotions as colors and there is a chance that your son can't even see the color red because your Uncle Howard was color-blind and you read that was genetic. Kiss you son's closed eyelids.

° ° °

Decide that you like parenthood. Your sister sends you several magazines that follow several mommy blogs of women who are perfectly capable of commanding four children under the age of three while keeping their white shag carpeting impeccable.

You also print out small cartoons of soccer moms pretending not to drink vodka out of soda bottles or sneaking smokes during nap-time and turn them into magnetic conversation pieces for your fridge.

You like to cut out the heads of the mommy bloggers and glue them on the cartoons.

You discovered the toaster can hold magnets too when you run out of surface room on the fridge.

Your child likes to sleep for at least six hours now.

All in twenty-minute increments until 1 am.

You think you can remember what a shower feels like.

Your child said 'mommy' for his first word. Smile uncontrollably for an hour after this.

° ° °

Enroll your child in the prestigious pre-school up town. The one

where the teachers always smile with all their teeth showing. Your child's teacher can show twenty-two teeth in one morning greeting. Your son always squeezes you hand tighter when she does this, and leans against your leg before you go. One classmate's parent with very empty eyes notices that your son always wears his favorite shirt on Monday. She read this could be a sign of autism. Decide you will show this parent twenty-six of your teeth when you smile.

Politely point out to Empty Eyes that her daughter just ate a handful of glue.

Buy your son another favorite shirt that looks just like the first.

° ° °

On your second week back at work, the new boss with the comb-over that reaches his cheekbones informs you that your child's pre-school is calling.

"Your son has a case of severe head lice," his toothy teacher tells you. She believes in giving parents news in a 'compliment sandwich'.

"Your son has a severe case of head lice," she repeats, "but he did an amazing job at circle time."

"Three other kids had shown up with lice the day before—did you read the note about the special shampoo I had suggested getting?"

Help her remember that metaphorical bread compliments should go on the outside of the bad news in a compliment sandwich.

"So you didn't buy the shampoo?" she asks.

° ° °

When you pick up your son, he tells you sweetly that his head doesn't itch. His teacher smiles toothily and tells you that she read somewhere that a numb scalp on a child is a sign of high cognitive skills.

The doctor you take him to reveals that he doesn't have lice at all. He must have poured a bucket of sand in his hair. The doctor promises to have the nurse write a note and then blankly stares at you when you ask if a numb scalp is a sign of high cognitive skills.

Your son asks if you two can go get ice cream, and it seems like an excellent idea.

° ° °

When you go to get ice cream, your son picks out your favorite flavor as his own. He likes to lick it off with the spoon upside down in his mouth the same way you do. Imagine the odd mirror image of the two of you eating ice cream the same way. This makes you smile.

"It's very itchy now, Mommy.

Your son starts scratching his head vigorously.

Pond Life
by rita dee peters

Scraps of Summer
by caroline b. pidgeon

Dewy mornings,
Of cowboy games,
When birds first chirped,
Exhausted long before noon,
The birds and us.

Afternoons so screaming hot,
We stripped to midriffs.
Popsicle stains,
Dirt streaked bare feet,
Ponytails hanging loose,
We could've been street urchins
Instead of southern suburbanites.
Hunting for a lawn sprinkler,
Or wondering if the cool ride down
Was worth pedaling up the hill.

Lucky if the swing was in the shade
Or an afternoon squall blew in.
The only sure thing
Would be the mosquitoed night
Speckled with fireflies.
Smelling of pine
And garden roses.

Hierarchy
by cathryn b. campbell

Poems from Kyrgyzstan
by david dry

For the 2016-17 academic year, A-B Tech history instructor David Dry has been teaching at the International University of Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek as a Fulbright Scholar, and he has selected poetry from a few of his students in Kyrgyzstan for inclusion in *The Rhapsodist*.

With a landscape dominated by some of the world's tallest mountains, Kyrgyzstan is sometimes referred to as "the Switzerland of Central Asia." Its people, the Kyrgyz, were historically nomads. Traveling from place to place on horseback and raising herds of sheep, the Kyrgyz people did not initially develop of an extensive written culture. Instead, poetry and storytelling took oral form. Bards, known as Manaschi, specialized in reciting from memory a story now known as *The Epic of Manas*, often considered the world's longest epic poem. *The Epic of Manas* recounts the mythical exploits and battles of the Kyrgyz hero Manas, and it still serves as a source of unity and identity for the Kyrgyz people.

Russian, and later Soviet, infiltration into the region introduced new literary forms, and although artistic works were subject to censorship in the Soviet Union, some Kyrgyz authors critiqued Soviet society. The most renowned of all Kyrgyz authors was novelist Chinghiz Aitmatov. In his work, Aitmatov underscored tensions between Kyrgyz traditions and the atheist and corrupt aspects of Soviet modernity, and it surprised many at the time that some of his works were permitted to be published by Soviet authorities.

Now, twenty-five years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the artists of Kyrgyzstan are free to express their thoughts without restrictions. During his time in Kyrgyzstan, Instructor David Dry encountered several students with a passion for expressing themselves through poetry. While these students represent a continuation of the literary and poetic traditions of Kyrgyzstan, the themes of their submissions transcend culture and demonstrate how some emotions are universal in the human experience. Their work is presented here in English and Russian, which remains one of the official languages of Kyrgyzstan.

Untitled
by Kambarov Syimyk Usenovich

Go to you, to your loving arms.
Forgetting about the past stormy times,
What gave me pleasure,
And pain at the same.
I could not forget all that was,
All those smiles, charming laughter,
But about me, alas, I forgot.
I cannot go back to those days.
Resigned to the pain of such,
Accusing myself in heartache.
Accept the fact that you do not have.
This separation is not accidental.
How many happy moments,
In our meetings you bestowed,
The touch of your lips,
Without words says a lot.
You were a speck of light,
Illuminating the depths of the soul.
And hung (wilted) in the darkness of night.
As the beam is off, you are gone.

Иду к тебе, к твоим объятиям.
Забыв о прошлых бурных днях,
Что подарили мне отраду,
И боль одновременно не уняв.
Не смог забыть всего что было,
Все те улыбки, звонкий смех,
Но про меня, увы, забыла.
Не возвратить мне дней былых.
Смирившись с болью таковой,
Обвинив себя в страданиях.
Приняв тот факт что нет тебя.
Разлука эта неслучайна.
Как много радостных минут,
При наших встречах ты дарила,
Прикосновенье твоих губ,
Без слов о многом говорило.
Ты была частичкой света,
Озарявшей глубь души.
И вот поник во тьме ночной.
Как луч погас, исчезла ты

Untitled
by Baktygul Shailoobek Kyzy

Never heard and never felt,
Never seen and never known,
What is a trustworthy father,
What is the love of a father?!

Who can tell me,
Who can show me,
Father's love and
Father's care?

Without the father's care,
I grew up without fear.
'Cause there was a mother's care,
And I can say:
She gave me all her life,
For protection my life.
Everything was in her life,
Everyone knows her hard life,
'Cause she ain't complaining to life.

Ne'er the less,
Who can tell me,
Who can show me,
Father's love and
Father's care?

Никогда не слышала и никогда не чувствовала,
Никогда не видела и никогда не знала,
Кто такой родной отец,
Что такое любовь отца.

Кто расскажет,
Кто покажет ,
Любовь отца и,
Отцовства любовь.

Без заботы отца,
Я выросла без страха.
Потому, что была забота матери
И я могу сказать :
Кто дал мне всю свою жизнь,
Для защиты моей жизни.
Всё была в её жизни,
Никто не знает тяжёлую её жизнь,
Потому, что не жаловалась к жизни.

Как бы это не было,
Кто расскажет,
Кто покажет ,
Любовь отца и,
Отцовства любовь.

Untitled
by Arseniy Pisarev

Some things will be always remembered
While others are worth to forget
A twist and a turn in a frantic crescendo
A fragment of life to regret

Some things never go out of season
While others get covered with dust
A moment of ease, ever hideous treason
Have faded along with the past

Some things can incise your heart open
Some things, they can tear you apart
Some things, they can make you feel broken
And kill the desire to start

Some things can, however, remind you
That there is always a door
That leads out of gloom, to incredible wonder
A world where a heart's meant to soar

О многих вещах всегда будут помнить
А о многих лучше забыть,
Каждый маленький изгиб в неистовом крещендо
Напоминает о каком-нибудь сожалении

Какие-то вещи никогда не выходят из моды
В то время как другие покрываются пылью,
Момент лёгкости, гнусная измена
Расствorились вместе с прошлым

Некоторые вещи могут разрезать сердце
Некоторые вещи могут разорвать на части
Некоторые вещи могут заставить чувствовать себя сломанным
И уничтожить желание что-то начинать

Некоторые вещи, однако, могут напомнить
Что всегда есть дверь,
Что ведёт из мрака в необыкновенное чудо,
В мир, где сердце парит

Rhapsodist Poster
by madison johnson

A Thank You Note
by beverly williamson

On January 20, 2009, my son and I danced with the Obamas. Yes, we were there with the smiling tuxedoed President and the regal First Lady. I had on my fat pants and fleece socks; my son had on his onesie pajamas.

Oh, and we were at home.

But we were as happy as anyone at the ball. As we glided across the rug, I said, "whee" and "yea" as I dipped him, and he clenched his little legs around my waist exclaiming, "A rock a bama! A rock a bama!"

I had tears in my eyes.

I was happy because for the first time in my voting life; I felt like someone had counted my little vote, and it counted. My son was happy because it was past his bedtime, he was dancing, and the President had such a fun name.

Here, I feel I must go back and confess why I voted for Barak Obama the first time. I believed that President Obama would bring every single military person – man, woman, and bomb-sniffing dog – home. I looked forward to stories of families reunited. I knew that at last all those boys and girls who had signed up not knowing a thing about what was really going on over there (and there could be a number of places) would come home, go to college, get a job, live to be old.

I thought this might take two or three months.

I also voted for Barack Obama because I believed that the man-eating monster that is racial tension would at last disappear. Black women would not be followed in department stores (That happened to Oprah, you know!), black men would not be pulled over for DWB (Driving While Black – it's really a thing!), and roadblocks to education for young, bright teenagers would be removed.

I thought this might take six to eight months.

And I could not vote for the honorable John McCain because if the worst had happened, Sarah Palin, with her incredible foreign-country-spotting vision, would have been president.

Enough about that.

I found it much harder to go to the polls in 2012. People still dying. People still angry. I was tired and back to believing my vote didn't count. But I went, and I voted for our President, again, for two main reasons. A very dear friend – a father of two young sons, a devoted and loving husband, a charming and dear person – was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer. Through the nightmare of chemotherapy and endless worry, one fact that has destroyed so many families dealing with cancer was no longer a fact. My friend, who did miraculously survive, would not be refused health insurance.

And I could not vote for someone whose advice to students who want go to college or start a business was to borrow from their parents. The most

my parents could give me was gas money.

Enough about that.

Here, I feel I must go way back to a March day in 2005. My baby was just weeks old, and I was suffering from postpartum depression and sleep deprivation. I was, however, able to love and admire my beautiful son and was watching him sleep in a way that only a mother can watch a child sleep. I imagine I was also yawning and about to nod off myself when a frightening thought settled in my hormonally charged brain: "I have created a white man. A white man. Oh my God. I have created the exact version of my own species responsible for death, destruction, warfare, want, hunger, rape, pillage. All the world's problems from the beginning of time!" My vision of his angelic face began to blur.

"My tiny little white man." I reached down, brought him to my chest and held him close. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

In fairness, I probably only thought about that for twenty to thirty seconds because in the next twenty to thirty seconds, I was probably thinking about diaper rash.

But, the point is I really had that thought, and as eleven years have gone by, I have continued to worry over the fact of my son's race and gender from time to time in varying quantities. I want him to be kind, compassionate, open-minded, accepting, loving. I want him to have peace and happiness and fun and adventure.

So a great part of my life is devoted to what I want my son to be and have. It's a daunting task filled with fear and hope, holding on and letting go, taking charge and getting out of the way. I have had some extraordinarily good luck though. Until very recently, my son has never known anyone other than Barak Obama as the President of the United States.

Imagine it. Honestly, I find it hard to grasp at times. Just as I can never know what it's like to live without remembering when you had to go in the house, pick up the phone and dial the number. Or go to the library and look up the capital of New Zealand. In an encyclopedia.

A black person has been the leader of my son's country, has held the highest office in his nation, has been revered and criticized, has had the most responsibility it is possible to have, and bore it all with grace and intelligence and composure. My son can never know what it is like not to have an African-American president.

Did former President Obama lead perfectly? In my opinion, he did not – nor, of course did any President before him. Did he single-handedly communicate something to my son that all my words wrapped in gold and delivered in an ice cream truck could never explain?

Oh, yes he did. Oh, yes indeed.

Thank you, A Rock A Bama.

contributors

Markia C.T. Brooks:
Markia C.T. Brooks is a poet and recent graduate from University of North Carolina at Asheville where she received her Bachelor's of Arts in creative writing. Markia was raised in Harlem, NYC and Greenville, SC. These two cities have had a lasting impact on her life and her writing. Currently, she lives and works in Asheville, NC, with loved ones and like-minded artistic folks.

Cathryn Campbell:
For the past few years, Cathryn's life has been consumed by college, and she is finally graduating this May with her Associate in Fine Arts. Going to college has enabled her to find a deeper meaning in art. She feels so fortunate to have found what fulfills her, and she thanks the Fine Arts department at A-B Tech for helping her along.

Chelsea Ensley:
Chelsea Ensley is graduate from UNCA with a B.A. in English and a graduate from Appalachian State University with an M.A. in Appalachian Studies. Chelsea's writings are influenced by her upbringing in Black Mountain, NC, as well as by her grandfather who worked as a park naturalist on Mount Mitchell during the 1960s. Currently, she works as a writing center assistant at A-B Tech and continues to be inspired by the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Amie Estes:
Amie Estes is a very part-time student and a very full-time service-industry gremlin. In her scarce free time, she drinks wine and hangs out with Lucifer - the cat, that is. She feels very honored, kind of sheepish, and legitimately surprised to be included in this issue, but overall very grateful.

Bonnie Milne Gardner:
Bonnie Milne Gardner is a playwright, director, and educator who's lived in Ohio, Virginia, & NYC and has escaped to the mountains of WNC to write. A life-long member of Dramatists Guild, her 30+ scripts have been produced/won awards all over the country, including The Cleveland Play House, NYC's New School for Drama, and Edward Albee's New Frontier Conference in Valdez, Alaska. "One Last Mass" was performed at the 2007 Human Rights Theatre Festival in San Diego.

Logan Marshall Guarglia:
Logan was born in Raleigh, NC and raised in Greensboro, NC. He moved to Asheville, NC in 2016 in order to pursue his degree in the arts at UNCA. Logan is grateful to be given the gift as an artist and looks forward to what the arts have in store for him.

Abigail Hickman:
Abigail Hickman is a recluse who enjoys drinking milkshakes that are too thick for straws.

Mary Jamieson:
Since 2015, Mary's art interests have transitioned from a career as a landscape designer to expressing through acrylic painting. She's interested in learning all facets of this medium and appreciates all who so generously give their time and opinions to guide her on this path. Landscapes are her favorite subject to paint, but all forms of nature are appealing to her.

Mark Klepac:
Mark Klepac is alright. Mostly. He spaces out a little too much on the road. Sometimes he writes songs. Sometimes he plays with photographs. He's usually on the verge of farting.

Joanna Maldonado:
Joanna is not yet an artist. But she will be. One day.

Ana Kateri Salas Montano:
Ana is 19 years old, and is from a city in Mexico called Guadalajara. Moving to the Unites States was not easy, but it taught her to appreciate her culture and to be open to new ones. She creates art to record her experiences and her culture using her eyes as lenses of a camera to capture real objects and places that she feels personally connected to. Her goal is to become an architect with a focus on sustainable designs.

Ella Mowad:
Ella Mowad is doing chemistry in the pantry.

Eric Overbey:
Eric Overbey is doing math in the basement.

Isabel Perez-Solis:
Isabel Perez-Solis, grew up in Mexico and moved to Asheville at the age of 15. She is a registered nurse, and enjoys writing poetry. Poetry has been the magic of her dreams and her escape from reality.

Ellen J. Perry:
Ellen J. Perry is a Literature and Humanities instructor at A-B Tech and UNC-Asheville. Her academic interests include 17th- and 18th-century British life and literature, Restoration drama, and Southern/Appalachian culture. Ellen's short story "Milk, Bread, Soft Drinks" was awarded First Place in Fiction by the *Bacopa Literary Review* and published in their print journal (October 2015). Additional works of original fiction have appeared in *Deep South Magazine*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, and *Gravel* among others. Ellen enjoys traveling to the beach, dancing, reading, and playing with her stylish cat, Ms. Coco Chanel. For more information please visit Ellen's website at www.ellenjperry.com.

Mark Damon Puckett:
Mark Damon Puckett (markdamonpuckett.com) is an Asheville novelist, playwright, poet and trumpet player who recently finished his fourth Master's degree, the MLitt in poetry at the Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury College. He has been a Honda salesman in L.A., a travel editor on Fifth Avenue and a technology analyst in Connecticut. He is an avid supporter of *The Rhapsodist* in his classrooms and teaches ten writing courses a year at A-B Tech.

Robert Michael Ridenour:
Rob's always loved telling stories. The first story he ever wrote was a sequel to *Peter Pan* when he was in fifth grade. He grew up on old black and white horror films which began his passion for monsters and the fantastic. Author Clive Barker has been a huge inspiration when it comes to how he looks at the world. It's a dark and dangerous place, but there's always hope if you want to look for it. He tries to capture this tone in all his stories through his own voice and experiences.

Ethan Risinger:
Grey is a young writer from- oh my bad
or: :) :(:) :(:) :(:) :(:I
or: oh no no no no please really, no please, really, oh gosh, really please! Well, Well ok thank you really please. I can't ok please ok really ok really please. I really no no I know I can't really but please. I can't really but please.

Traci Thompson:
Traci fell in love with the romance of photography when she started shooting with her father's Nikon film camera in '99. She enjoys capturing a fleeting moment in the human experience within this fast-paced world. While living in Atlanta and Asheville, she added education to her passion by taking a few courses at several community colleges (A-B Tech included) and will always be a student of photography.

Sara Wheeler:
Sara Wheeler grew up in Old Fort NC and was always inspired by the nature surrounding her home in the country. She grew up with a love for Victorian children's novels such as *The Secret Garden, Peter Pan,* and *Alice in Wonderland.* Sara is currently pursuing her English degree, and plans on becoming a professor of literature.

Melanie Yvonne White:
Melanie White is all about writing about her world with words that capture people's minds, souls, and hearts—words that take you on a journey through a maze of the mind of Melanie White.

Beverly Williamson:
Beverly Williamson is a full time English Instructor at A-B Tech. She lives in Asheville and is a native North Carolinian.

Savannah J. Willingham:
Facetious mother of one doomed to be sarcastically inclined daughter and one blind dog who knows no limits. Blog writer, aspiring short story creator, and true believer that at least twenty-three people (and all the others) published in this book of student creations are going to contribute unique things to society. Even if someone else already thought of it first. www.AdventuresofaKula.wordpress.com

Kaitlyn G. Young:
Kaitlyn G. Young is a Madison Early College student who lives, eats, sleeps, and breathes art. She has won several local art contests. She prefers pencil sketch drawing over all other mediums. She plans to major in art at UNCA and be a starving artist one day (just kidding, maybe).

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